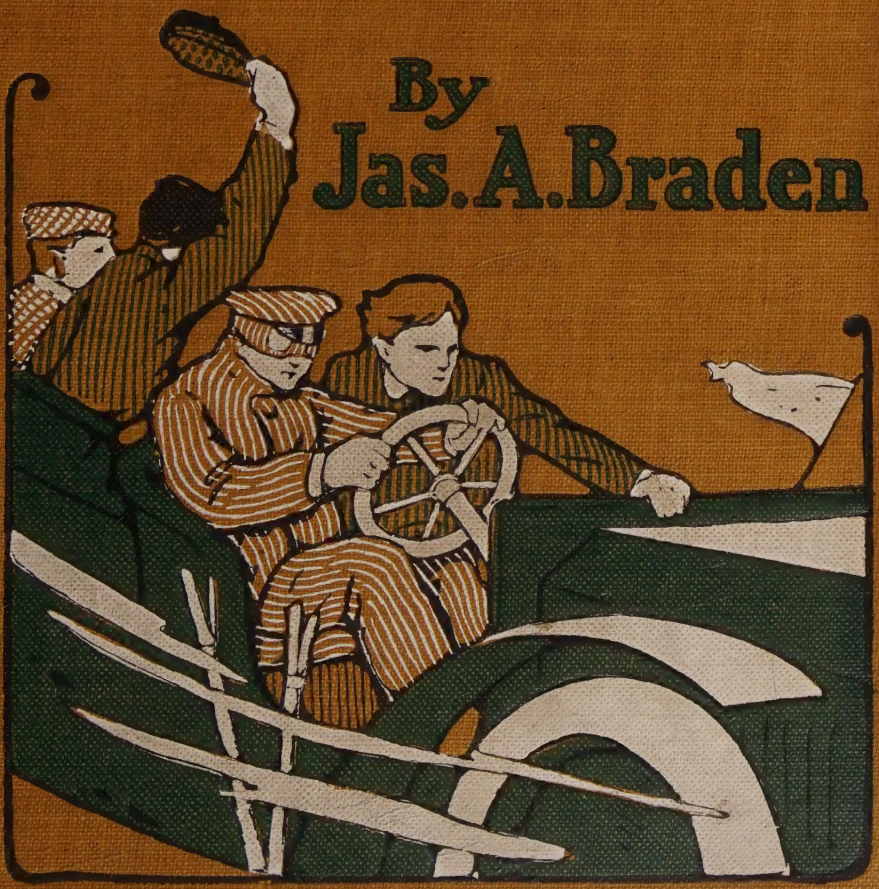
The AUTO BOYS'

By
Jas. A. Braden



Joseph M. Casner,

Joseph M. Casner,

No-47- Joseph M. Casner,

(129) B

To
Joseph
From his
Father

Joseph M. Casner,

"I'm so glad you had a wet morning to start the game off."

(*page 176.*)

THE AUTO BOYS

By JAMES A. BRADEN

AUTHOR OF

"FAR PAST THE FRONTIER," "CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE," "THE TRAIL OF THE SENECA," "CAPTIVES THREE," Etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY ARTHUR DeBEBIAN

1911

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY

CHICAGO AKRON, OHIO NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1908
BY
THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING CO.

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	The Young American Contract Company	9
II.	The Retreat of the Forest Rangers	27
III.	"We'll Take the Car"	44
IV.	"Don't Blab It"	64
V.	The Most Fun Yet	85
VI.	A Discovery and a Suspicion	102
VII.	The Star Lake Club	119
VIII.	A Busy Day for Con Cecil	138
IX.	All Aboard for Star Lake	156
X.	Crooked Work at Star Lake	175
XI.	Con Cecil's Problem	190
XII.	A Mysterious Message	205
XIII.	A Night Trip and an Adventure	219
XIV.	A New Berth for Cecil	234
XV.	A Trap on the North Shore	250
XVI.	A Rapid Run to Star Lake and the Result	267
XVII.	A Fruitless Search	282
XVIII.	Helping Tyler Gleason	299
XIX.	A Mysterious Stranger	315
XX.	"Bawled Out for Fair"	328
XXI.	Dark Clouds on the Auto Boys' Horizon	344
XXII.	A Discovery at the Old Hut	359
XXIII.	Mid Wind and Rain	374
XXIV.	"The End of the String, at Last"	389

ILLUSTRATIONS

Page

"I'm so glad you had a wet morning to start the game off" .....Frontispiece

Billy Worth is master of ceremonies and guards the long-handled frying pan constantly..... 52

The four lads bent over the message..... 202

"Not a word, mind you, to anybody about this trip" 316

CHAPTER I

THE YOUNG AMERICAN CONTRACT COMPANY

"There are some young fellows staying out at the Brush hotel at Star Lake; three of 'em. They have an automobile," said Billy Worth.

"Don't I know it?" ejaculated Paul Jones forcibly. "They're a fine bunch!"

"Why, what's the matter with 'em?" asked Dave MacLester, his interest stirred, not so much by what Paul said as by the way he said it.

"Oh, nothing much, I s'pose. But the way they swell around makes me tired, and—"

There was such contempt in Paul's expression and in his thoughts that he failed to find at once words strong enough to meet requirements.

"They call themselves the Star Lake club," put in Phil Way, quietly. "They are from

Westerfield and their uncle comes up from there every few days and stays with them. The automobile belongs to him, I guess."

As usual, Phil's was the last voice heard. As usual, what he said was accepted at face value and, if not altogether beyond argument, at least not open to general criticism.

"Well, I only wish that somebody or other who's rich and could afford it, couldn't scratch till he had given me an automobile—a big touring car," said Paul. "I'd take you fellows out for a spin that would make you glad to get home again."

"Don't doubt that at all!" exclaimed Billy, with a laugh. "We probably never *would* get home again."

"Not with you at the wheel, Paul," Dave MacLester put in, "if you got as much mixed up with the pedals as you do with your metaphors."

"Why, there wasn't any metaphor in what Jones said. Just a figure of speech," returned Phil.

"Better run along and sell your papers, boy," grinned Paul, turning to Dave patronizingly.

"But I'll bet Jones would think the pedals on an automobile were about the same as those on a piano, at that," Dave spoke up,—"one to blow the horn soft, and one loud."

"Or else like a bicycle—to make the thing go," suggested Billy.

A retort in kind gleamed in Paul's eye but before he could speak—

"Hush up, will you? There's business to be attended to," said Phil. "Who knows how much money this company has on hand?"

"Pretty nearly enough to buy an automobile, for that matter," murmured Dave, persisting in following the former subject.

"We have one hundred and ninety dollars and twenty cents," Phil went on seriously, declining to notice Dave's comment; and drawing a small red memorandum book from his pocket he pointed to the figures.

"And the Forest Rangers have fifty-eight dollars more," added Billy.

"And Judge Crossley owes us a dollar forty, and Mrs. Chase ninety cents and we owe—"

"Oh, he's got that all down! Goodness, Bill! Can you never be quiet? S'pose we keep books in our heads?" Paul growled savagely, though strangely enough his caustic manner disturbed young Mr. Worth not a particle.

"How much do we owe, Phil, and how much have we to collect?" inquired Dave with business-like interest. "Give us the full report like you did that other time."

"Well, I know of somewhere near two dollars and seventy-five cents we'll never get, and that's for delivering for that old huckster, Binski. I told him good and plenty, the last time I saw him, that we'd either have the money or we'd have satisfaction. The old skinflint!"

"Yes, you're a real diplomatic collector—over the left," Billy Worth answered, but an amused smile took the edge off his cutting sar-

easm; and, wonderful to tell, both he and Paul then were silent while Phil began a formal report of the financial condition of the "Young American Contract Company."

Deposited in the Lannington Savings Bank	$154.00
Deposited in the First National Bank	32.00
Interest credited on money in the Savings Bank	3.24
Interest credited on money in the National Bank	.96
Total	$190.20

Phil paused and glanced about him with an air of importance; but as the other members of the company were all attention and none ventured remarks, he continued:

"Accounts receivable are the following:"

"Naw, give us the bills that ain't collected yet, next, an' see how much it will add to what's in bank," Paul Jones demanded.

"It's just what he's *going* to do, dummy!

Didn't he say 'accounts receivable?'" ejaculated Dave MacLester with superior wisdom. "Go on, Phil."

Paul grinned good-naturedly at this reproach upon his knowledge of business. His feelings were not hurt in the least. Indeed, just what might have injured him in that portion of his being would be hard to say. In the lexicon of *his* youth the word sensitive had no place.

"Accounts receivable," Phil resumed with a smile, "are the following:

Judge James Crossley, 14 hours on lawn, at 10 cents $1.40
Mrs. Sophia Chase, delivering 30 invitations ..... .90
Success Business College, passing bills... .75

"Total of old accounts on paper route, not counting $.12 from Dick Passers, moved away, and $.36 from Joe Rallcey, dead-beat and no good, and $.36 from the woman in Factory Alley that's dead. Balance collectable,—$2.88."

"Say, we ought to cut people off on the paper

if they don't pay every week. There's thirty-six and thirty-six and twelve—why, eighty-four cents that's no good. There ain't no business can stand it," said Dave MacLester soberly. "And you didn't put in the money from Binski, either. I just expect that hits us for two seventy-five more. I tell you, fellows, no company can keep up a business when somebody's always eating up the profits by not paying."

"That Binski money was crossed out and marked N. G. a month ago. You all know that," Phil answered, seriously. "The others that make up the eighty-four cents might as well be."

"Well, I could have told you that Rallcey was a flimmer—always jawing and finding fault! That's the kind that will beat a man out of his money if anyone does."

These remarks from young Mr. Jones going unchallenged, Treasurer Way continued his report.

Accounts payable—

Repairs on lawn-mower.....$0.75

And still due Peters & Thompson for
horse and wagon to haul old rubber.. .50

"Why, don't you ask *this* time who smashed the lawn-mower, Paul?" inquired Dave, with sarcasm.

"Oh, Mac, hush that up! Don't be forever looking for trouble! The company smashed the lawn-mower, that's who smashed it! Whether you broke it the last time, or Jones broke it this time, it's for nobody to ask except in a decent, civilized way and then just for information. But so far as I'm concerned, and you're concerned and all the rest of us, as well as people in general, it was the American Contract Company that happened to have some machinery damaged by tumbling over Judge Crossley's wall, and the company will pay for it and forget it."

With this little lecture Phil showed, though wholly unconsciously, the secret of his acknowledged leadership among the four companions. He revealed, too, the principle which had made their business as well as all their other under-

takings, either in work and in play, a success. Having spoken thus, he closed the little red book and asked: "So, now, what next?"

"Seems to me that money in the woods ought to be put where it would be bringing in something," Dave suggested.

"S'posin' we'd have a corn-roast out at the cave an' bring the Forest Ranger treasure in when we came—only there won't be any corn for awhile yet," proposed Paul Jones.

"That's all right, only make it fish instead of corn an' go any day," said Dave, amending Paul's motion.

"Say, you two are out of order," Billy Worth spoke up. "Let's do business right. The next thing is to act on the financial report. I make a motion that it be accepted."

Paul Jones as president—an office in which he usually forgot his duties entirely, leaving everything of the kind to Phil—put the motion, now seconded by Dave, and it was quickly carried.

"That's the way to do it," exclaimed Phil,

with hearty approval. "The right subject for attention now is dividends. We agreed not to talk of it till we had over two hundred dollars in bank, or in sight. What are we going to do about divvying up something? I've a little scheme thought out, but I'll break it gradual like when the rest of you have talked."

All three voices at once called upon Way to make his plan known, and Paul added—Jones could always be counted upon to do his share of talking, "Whatever it is, I vote yes, even if it's buy an automobile. Gosh all fish-hooks! We've talked of it often enough! Talked of it when we had just our first five dollars to put away, and didn't think we ever would have more'n forty! Or maybe we did hope to get enough to buy a pony to use amongst us, or maybe a shot-gun apiece. Spiel away, Phil! What is it?"

"You've guessed it, Paul," the young leader answered quietly and, as he often did, glanced quickly from face to face to see how his proposal was received.

"Whoo—pe-e! Do ye mean it, Phil?" This from young Mr. Jones, of course, always ready for anything, always an enthusiastic follower, but seldom originating, and rarely shouldering any particular responsibility.

Dave and Billy were more serious. "A hundred and ninety dollars plus fifty-eight—two hundred and forty-eight dollars. Can't buy much of an automobile for that, Phil," said the former.

"Nope, so you can't," Way answered, yet with an air of confidence. "But how about building our own? There are a lot of automobile-makers that just buy the parts and put them together."

"Sounds pretty good to me, off hand. Jimminy! I just wish we did have a car!" Billy put in, laughing to see Paul, with feet braced and his hands gripping an imaginary steering wheel, as if the machine were already a reality and he driving it forty miles an hour, at the very lowest estimate.

"Like as not it will do no good, but then it

won't do any harm, and I'm going to tell you the plan I said I had thought out," Phil resumed. "I guess you fellows know pretty well that I wouldn't be the one to vote to throw away the money we've saved on anything foolish; but if we can put our whole partnership capital where it will earn more and still more for all of us, why, we're just carrying out the very object we first had in working together and saving together and going partners in everything from cutting grass to fire-works."

Phil spoke in a low but delightfully pleasing voice. There was never in his tone or manner for a moment any note of avarice, of grasping stinginess or miserliness; no mark of any desire to accumulate money simply for money's sake.

"What put this idea of an automobile seriously into my head happened yesterday. Two men came into Hooker's garage and wanted to hire a car and a chauffeur to take them to Star Lake to fish. Hooker was alone and there wasn't anyone to take them, and so he made

some excuse and wouldn't let the chaps have a machine unless he furnished the driver. The trouble was he had no one to drive. I guess the men hired a horse at the Red Barns. They went away at any rate and Hooker said to me:

"'There's any number of people here every day wanting to be taken to Star Lake. I can't take 'em and there'd be no money in it anyway to run out there and leave the machine and the driver standin' idle all afternoon, or till the passengers got ready to come back again. Wish to goodness there was a trolley out that way, or something!'

"'What's the matter with an automobile passenger line?' I asked him.

"'Just one thing,' he answered, 'and that is right here: nobody goes to Star Lake much except about four months in the year—first o' June, to the first of October, say. What's your hackman going to do the rest o' the year? Well, there ye have it. Nothin' doin'.'

"Well, I didn't say any more about it, but, fellows, I've been doing some thinking. Guess

I've been as interested as any of you in automobiles, anyway, so here's what I've been working up to. The season when an automobile passenger service to Star Lake would pay is straight through the long vacation. If we had the car—the right kind of a car—we could almost make it pay for itself this summer yet."

Billy Worth was busy with a stubby pencil, doing some figuring on a convenient shingle, even before Phil paused. "Why, lookee here!" he exclaimed. "Here's slathers of wealth. Two trips each way a day; four passengers a trip at half a dollar per, equals four trips at two dollars apiece, equals eight dollars. Gee Whillikins! Eight dollars a day, forty-eight dollars a week! Thirteen weeks of vacation. Thirteen times forty-eight—six, twenty-four—six hundred and twenty-four dollars!"

"But you can't carry four people in any six hundred dollar automobile, to say nothing of the driver, and you can't buy any kind of a car for all the money we can muster," argued David MacLester.

It was like him—never failing to do his part, yet balking sturdily at new enterprises, and seeing only the difficult side. Still the effect of the objection with which he greeted all new propositions was beneficial, too. Often it had been the only means by which the young partners were brought to realize that there are two sides to every question. Once or twice it had saved them from rushing into ventures which could only have resulted disastrously.

One instance of this kind was the idea of buying eggs in summer, packing them in salt and selling at high prices in winter. Billy had proposed this plan and it was finally tried in a small way as an experiment. The salt hardened, for some reason, and the eggs could scarcely be taken out without breaking. Those that were removed successfully looked stale, and brought only storage prices. Altogether the Young American Company was glad to be out of the business with only a small financial loss, and nothing whatever for the time and labor of its members.

True, it was not often that Phil became so enthused over any project that he failed to weigh correctly the chances of failure. As some would say, his head was usually "level." But he was ready to hear any argument for either side at any time. Dave was just naturally opposed to new things, just naturally pessimistic, though after all, a most likable and generous lad, too.

"Billy didn't figure just as I have," said Phil, answering Dave's objection. "In the first place, I thought we ought to average three trips a day, it's light so early and light so late in summer, and the Brush hotel people ought to pay us a good big bonus for carrying people to their place. And besides there will be a good many campers who will pay for having packages and mail and a hundred other things carried back and forth. On pleasant Saturdays we could make four trips each way to balance up the trips we lost when the machine broke down—for it's sure to happen that the car will not run smooth as silk all the time."

"You bet it won't," Dave ejaculated, yet visibly brightening under the influence of Phil's quiet arguments.

"But we aren't going to buy a car today, and couldn't if we wanted to," Phil concluded after some further remarks from all the boys. "The points for us to be thinking about, to talk over another time, are whether we really want to buy an automobile with the expectation of making it pay for itself. Also whether the scheme is practical, and if it is, how can we manage it. And now we better talk about other things—bringing in that Forest Ranger money, for instance. Dave's right. It ought to be in the bank earning interest for us, and being of some account to some one else as well."

And thus it was agreed directly that the gold and silver coins which, since March, had lain hidden beneath a rock in the woods, two miles distant, should be removed to a better place with little delay.

And thus do events of greatest consequence often have their beginning. It was impossible

to foresee that trouble, adventure, and days and nights of excitement and of downright danger would follow the innocent discussion that had taken place in the quiet shade of some old elms this May morning.

Yet, on the horizon of the Young American Contract Company the clouds were rising for every one of its members. And some were clouds of rosy tint, bright and cheerful; and some were clouds of fleecy lightness, thin and buoyant. But Oh, there were other clouds so black and stormladen that even bold young hearts might well have been frightened by them.

CHAPTER II

THE RETREAT OF THE FOREST RANGERS

Perched on a steep hillside and accessible by a single path mounting zigzag fashion from the valley below, a close observer traversing the banks of Catfish Creek would have seen among the trees a rude shelter built of logs and stones and earth. It seemed to be, indeed it was the walled-in entrance to a shallow cave extending back into the hillside beneath an over-hanging rocky ledge.

The spot was not far from the center of a tract of woods embracing several hundreds of acres. Beech, ash, oak, hickory and here and there a few chestnuts and again an elm or soft maple were originally the principal trees of the forest; but the oak and chestnut had been to a large extent cut down for lumber, the logs hauled off and the dead tops and rough stumps

left littering the ground. These things and the many thickets of rank underbrush, together with the tangled mass of broken trunks and branches of trees swept down here and there from the steep walls of the canyon by landslides and by storm and wind, contributed to make a wild and desolate scene.

Anyone passing through the valley could not have failed to be impressed by the extreme solitude of the forest. Even the deep and sluggish stream flowed dark and silently over and about the driftwood, which for years had been accumulating where forces of the current were weak or where obstructions caused by sliding earth or falling timber had arisen. There were suggestions of terrible secrets in the grim reflections mirrored in the deeper pools, and the dark waters whispered of them, but whispered so mysteriously and guardedly that its stealthy murmur only intensified the dread lonesomeness of the woods.

Little, indeed, would the stranger here have guessed that only two short miles distant was a

thriving city, or that in ten minutes he could climb the steep banks and presently emerge upon a level and well-traveled public road bordered by neat farm homes and cultivated fields and gardens.

But today the solitude of the woods is broken by youthful voices and four active, boyish figures mount the path to the cave, or hut, half way up the hillside.

A rather tall and slender chap, a trifle past fourteen, is foremost. A light cap rests jauntily upon his brown hair and leaves open to close scrutiny a pair of clear, but quiet eyes and an attractive, pleasant face. His red sweater and all his clothing bear evidence of having been in conflict with the underbrush before, or, at least, that they have seen pretty active service somewhere. And this is Phil Way—Philip Arthur Way, it is written on the records of the public schools of Lannington, and in the large Bible in his mother's room at home.

Next comes an alert young fellow of about the same age. He lacks nearly a head of equaling

Phil in height, but is of robust build—"beefy," the foot-ball captain calls it. He has very dark hair, very red cheeks,—to which nice old ladies and some who are not so old often make reference, much to his displeasure,—and sparkling brown eyes. He is dressed quite the same as the lad who precedes him.

Billy Worth is his name. It fits him well. Like the boy in the poem, "Father calls him William"; but from all others, unless it be teachers or strangers he bears "Billy". It is his surname, Worth, that seems especially well bestowed, for while Billy has his faults,—as who has not, indeed?—he averages up as square a chum and as capable a bunch of young bone and muscle, blood and brains as a good, long hunt would discover anywhere. But there will be abundant opportunity to learn his good points as well as those which do him less credit later; for the clouds are rising faster now, and faster still.

Dave MacLester is the third of the group clambering up the steep ascent. In disposition

and character he is much more of a problem than either Phil Way or Billy Worth. He is a trifle the oldest and a trifle the largest—nearly as tall as Phil, and heavier. A serious expression he wears almost constantly, though he can laugh as blithely as any.

If traced to its foundation, Dave's sober, almost defiant, cast of countenance would possibly be found to have first been put on together with a Lord Fauntleroy suit. He was a great deal younger then, but he despised curls and he despised the pretty, velvet clothes. Of course, in time they both were taken off to be worn again no more, but the serious expression was not so easily taken from about his mouth and eyes, nor the touch of moodiness from his disposition. And yet it would not do to convey the impression that Dave—David McLeod MacLester, to state his full name—was, in any pronounced way, disagreeable. He was a loyal friend, well behaved and generous. Though Phil and Billy surpassed him in quickness of

both head and hand, he was stronger than either of them.

Sometimes the most dauntless spirits are found in the smallest bodies. Paul Jones presented an example of this kind. Slender, and of almost frail appearance, he was neither timid nor, to be plain, excessively modest.

Paul came last as the four boys toiled up the hillside, but it only happened so. Though the youngest and the smallest of all, he was not often in the rear. Indeed, his tousled, sandy hair, slim, wiry body and legs of the same description, still clothed in short pants—though to his intense disgust, be it said,—were full as frequently at the front.

In his home environments Paul was the least favorably situated of any of the four friends. Though in no sense dependent upon his own efforts for support, he of necessity lived with a grown-up, married sister, for he was an orphan. In one way he had more liberties than the other lads, because less home restraint was put upon him; but if this were an advantage in any way,

it was a hardship in others, for the privilege of asking chums to meet at his home, or to spend an evening there, especially in winter, when inside gatherings were often desired, was very rarely his. But with his buoyant, care-free ways, his absolute unselfishness and ever ready tongue, Paul was generally popular. A too careless use of the ever-ready member just mentioned was, perhaps, his most glaring fault. Often he spoke with more valor than discretion and being not in the least sensitive himself, he frequently forgot that others might be unlike him in this respect.

"Gee! this house needs to be aired!" exclaimed Paul, still panting from the hard climb, as Phil threw open the door of the hut.

An odor of old smoke and ashes, of dead leaves and damp earth came forth as the door of driftwood boards swung round on its leather hinges.

"A fire will soon fix things up," Phil answered, hopefully, while Dave made some

good-humored remarks about stubby noses being apparently more sensitive than others.

The interior of the hut was much more comfortable than its outside appearance suggested. Loose boards were laid down to form a floor over the ground, and about the front of a small fire-place of flat stones and clay a low bench with a comfortable back, two chairs which had no backs, and a small table were grouped.

At the farthest side of the cave a large cracker box fitted with shelves and a door contained cups, plates, knives and forks, and some cooking utensils. Against the wall opposite the fire-place two box-like bunks were built up, one above the other. These, like the door and the flooring, were made of boards gathered from the drift the creek collected, and were supported by strong poles set in the ground.

Over the fire-place four axes were hung in loops of leather and against the rough stone wall of the chimney leaned a cross-cut saw. A towel, the original color of which might now be a matter of considerable argument, a tin basin

and some broken bits of soap in a box just within the door, and a water bucket on another box close beside them, completed, with one exception, the furnishings of the half-cave, half-cabin.

The exception noted in this list of the hut's equipment and conveniences was not a single item, but consisted of three things, all grouped upon the rough ledge which served as the fireplace mantel. Two of them, at least, were so oddly at variance with each other that any stranger must have been puzzled to find a connection. One was a framed picture of an automobile racing scene—the other a burnt-wood piece of strictly home-production, bearing the words, enclosed in a crude, irregular border, "Forest Rangers' Retreat." The third item was a pair of boxing gloves.

But the connection between "Forest Rangers' Retreat,"—which, it was plain, referred to the place wherein the sign was exposed to view, —and the automobile picture would possibly have been more apparent to anyone listening

to the conversation of the "Forest Rangers" themselves. They were talking as they hovered in and out of their headquarters while the fireplace was deciding whether it would send the smoke up through the chimney or out through the open door.

"If we can earn as much another winter as we did last, it will go a good way toward buying new tires or whatever we have to have another season, you see," said Phil.

"And gasoline and oil and paint," added Dave. He was still a little skeptical, notwithstanding that, through a combination of fortunate circumstances, the ownership of a motor car by the four friends was now an all but accomplished fact.

"But don't you fellows forget the agreement not to tell all over town how much Gleason paid us," put in Billy Worth, "or there'll be an end to the Forest Rangers, money, house and all."

"Just what I was going to say! You know Gleason!" piped up Paul Jones significantly, and Phil answered, quickly:

"Yes, that's right. We mustn't say a word."

To make this sample of the boys' conversation properly understood, it is necessary to go back into the history of the Forest Rangers, which will include also a brief history of the Young American Contract Company, and a look into the every-day lives of the lads themselves.

It was in Phil Way's active brain that the small company with the large name had its inception. Phil, though a doctor's son, and under no necessity of earning money for his own support, had found independence in the matter of funds for his personal requirements, useful and otherwise, a pleasant thing and convenient. It was this which led him to take a route for the delivery of a local evening daily. He prospered. The number of his patrons became so large he could scarcely give them all the prompt and early service he thought necessary, and which they much appreciated.

So Phil decided to have an assistant and a partner. But whom? This became a serious question. He didn't know whether he wanted

Billy, Dave or Paul. He was equally chummy with them all and each had helped him time and again.

"Better make it a stock company," his father had laughingly suggested. Like many another word spoken in jest, the doctor's remark grew and bore fruit.

It was in a large, low shed, which at one time had been a coal house, but now, painted outside and in, made an admirable meeting place for the boys, that Phil broached the stock company plan to his friends. No words can describe the enthusiasm with which it was received.

The two old elms, beneath which the green and yellow shed stood in Doctor Way's back yard, were forever whispering to each other and to the wind, and Phil thought, sometimes, that if they would speak one at a time he might guess what they were saying or what the breezes were telling them. But these old trees and the wind never whispered faster, or more

all at one time, than the four boys talked on the occasion mentioned.

Even Dave MacLester raised not one objection, and as for Paul,—why, that young gentleman had visions of all sorts of money-making enterprises, some as small as conducting a candy stand at the county fair, some as large as founding a bank. But the net result of the conference was a four-cornered, equal partnership whose charter was absolutely unlimited as to what it might or might not do.

The Young Specialists was the name at first adopted, but it didn't suit, and so the Young American Contract Company was selected instead. It was a company of vast capacity. Its members solicited and obtained business and work to do in the greatest diversity of forms.

So far as possible, everything was undertaken by contract. Judge Crossley might enter into an agreement with the company by which his lawn was to be mowed every week from May fifteenth to September fifteenth; or another might engage for the cutting of his grass a

single time. Either one must be in the form of a written or verbal contract and every contract must be ratified by a three-fourths vote of the company before any work was done.

Now, the object of this was not merely to make a play with a vast deal of red tape, but to bring all undertakings together for the purpose of making equitable division of the things to be done, and to see that a proper price was agreed upon in advance, the money collected and turned into the company's treasury.

The marked interest and continued enthusiasm of the Young American Contract Company was unquestionably responsible for its really extraordinary success. Before the first summer of its existence was over there were orders on hand quite constantly, and contracts in plenty offered, and awaiting acceptance, at very satisfactory prices. The newspaper route did not long remain the only regular and continuous source of revenue, although it grew to extensive size both in the work to be done and the money realized.

The boys built up in but a few weeks' time a messenger and delivery service, which came to be known to everyone in their part of the town. On monthly contracts there were, before long, a horse to be taken care of night and morning and—the oddest order any business concern ever had—a half-dozen squirrels to be fed, and an Angora goat and a great Dane dog to be exercised every day. These belonged to an eccentric old fellow, Daniel Dilworth by name, and a lawyer by profession, who is thus mentioned here because of his connection with the company's members in another way, later.

It may well be imagined that, what with matters requiring daily attention and the special undertakings which were assumed from time to time, especially on Saturdays, the Young American was an exceedingly busy company. And particularly is this true when it is considered that the members thereof had each his own personal duties to perform, to say nothing of school and of time for fun. For, while the enthusiasm of the young partners in their work never

flagged, they decided that business should not occupy their attention exclusively. It was a wise conclusion, of course, but there were some difficulties growing out of it. For instance, when should play end and work begin, and vice versa, and how were four partners all to stay late at a base ball game when two of them were required on the newspaper route?

However, these troubles, though often the cause of some argument, always adjusted themselves satisfactorily, and the joint bank account grew proportionately. Indeed, so successful were the boys that within a few months they had competition.

But the fire-place in the hut on the steep hillside has decided to be good now, the smoke goes merrily up the chimney, and the boys are getting their tackle ready to bring up a few nice catfish or three or four fine bass for dinner.

It is not for this only, however, that they are in the woods. There was a small, tin box of money hidden beneath a rock within sight of the cave, the last time they were here. It claims

a large share in their thoughts today. Just what the competition, to which reference has been made, had to do with this money is fully explained in the following chapter.

CHAPTER III

"WE'LL TAKE THE CAR"

The united efforts of the four partners had placed a very respectable sum in the bank to their credit at the end of their first summer of systematic work. As has been said, however, their success attracted the notice of others and competition was the result.

Three chaps styling themselves "The Grand Syndicate" began operations in the same section of the city and on a very similar plan. This might not have been particularly objectionable had the new company pursued good business methods; but such was not the case. Instead of looking for business on their own account, the three competitors looked for contracts among the patrons of the Young American concern, and sought by every method to obtain work which the latter had engaged.

In only a few instances did the "Syndicate" succeed in taking away orders from the original contractors. Phil Way, who usually proposed the prices to be charged by his company, had been strictly fair, and offers from the others to work for less generally only suggested to those who were approached the thought that it were better not to change than to risk the loss of service tried and not found wanting, for the sake of a possible small saving.

Still, the tactics of the "imitators, and blessed poor ones at that," as Paul Jones called them, were more or less annoying. The consequence was a decision reached by the Young American company to keep its affairs strictly confidential. The more their success was exploited, the more would the less original and less resourceful ones trail in their wake. Thus, well satisfied with the wisdom of maintaining secrecy regarding their business affairs, the boys voted unanimously to tell no one outside their own families of the plan they formed for the winter work.

In a nut-shell the scheme was to cut cord-wood, for which they paid almost nothing, and sell it at from four dollars to six dollars per wagon load.

Tyler Gleason, owner of Gleason's Ravine, was really the originator of the undertaking. Phil and Dave had gathered nuts "on shares" on the Gleason farm and the old gentleman, learning of their plans for earning money, invited them to help him clear up the woods in the deep valley which has already been described. He would charge nothing for the wood, he suggested, but for his man and team to do the delivering, he expected reasonable compensation. He stipulated but two things—that no other boys but Phil and Dave and their two friends should be allowed in the woods, and that none but fallen trees and such others as he might designate should be cut.

The proposition was accepted on these terms and the Young American Company became, for the time, The Forest Rangers. Somehow the name—it was Billy's suggestion—added ro-

mance to their enterprise and the rebuilding and furnishing of a shelter on the hillside, originally erected by some hunters but long since abandoned, also gave spice to the really hard work with axes and saw which soon was under way.

Very likely, too, it was the romance of the idea, more than anything else, which prompted the young men to hide in the woods all the money they earned in the winter's venture. They persuaded themselves, in very sober discussions, that their only object was to keep the knowledge of their undertaking from competitors, real or prospective, and this may have had something to do with it, particularly as Tyler Gleason desired that no inkling of what was going on should reach other boys.

But be that as it may, it is certain that the novelty of their surroundings, the delight of eating dinner before the fire in the half-cabin, half-cave, that has been described, and the satisfaction of seeing their possessions steadily increase, took the four lads to the woods very

nearly every Saturday or other holiday the whole winter through.

The result, as indicated in a former chapter, was a snug sum hidden away in a small metal chest, made by fitting one tin cracker box snugly within another and packing the space between with clay.

That not one of their friends and very few of their nearest relatives, even, knew anything about the Forest Rangers or the treasure concealed in the desolate ravine, gave an air of mystery to the work in the woods and all things connected with it. It was genuinely delightful to talk over the business and its prospects in guarded tones at frequent meetings on winter nights and even Phil, quiet and undemonstrative always, fairly reveled in the atmosphere of secrecy and romance the lads created about themselves.

As for Paul, as boisterous, usually, as Phil was quiet, and as sentimental as Phil was practical, no description could do justice to his visions and his enthusiasm. How he longed each

week for Saturday and every night dreamed of a joyous, care-free life in the woods, with plenty of adventure and a fortune buried in some safe place nearby! But how he worked, too! His slender arms might ache as if they would drop off, as full often they did before his muscles hardened to the swing of the ax and the pull of the saw, but he never faltered or complained.

Each in his own way, Billy Worth and Dave were no less keenly interested in the work each week, and the fun to be had, as well. Only once did the latter prove balky and that was when it was his turn to help load the wagon for "Duck" Neely, Mr. Gleason's hired man. It was very commonplace, every-day sort of work and with Phil and Paul racing to cut through a log with the cross-cut before Billy could chop a smaller one in two, a contest David was obliged to miss, he growled immoderately.

In the spring the ground in the valley was too soft for the team and wagon and no wood could be hauled. The market was not active,

anyway, and the Rangers left off their work here to prepare for the busy months in town. Nevertheless they found time now and then to spend an afternoon at the "Retreat," by which name they always called the hut on the hill, and although they invariably made sure their treasure was safe, the money was not removed from its hiding-place.

And it was not to put their winter's earnings in the bank, as the lads had always talked of doing, that they came at last to take the double tin box and its precious contents away. The money was already spent, or, what amounted to the same thing, the paying thereof had been agreed upon. It was a part of the purchase price of an automobile.

Now let the "Grand Syndicate" take notice! Let imitators bestir themselves exceedingly! Let the envious and the scoffers in every part of town take on the hue of jealousy! The Young American Contract Company, otherwise known privately as the Forest Rangers, will presently appear before the people of Lanning-

ton and the surrounding country as The Automobile Express and Transportation Company.

Dinner is nearly ready in the Retreat. The rich, delicious smell of fish, fresh caught, dressed and rolled in meal, and frying to a crisp brown—a very different odor than any market product could produce—is in the air.

Billy Worth is master of ceremonies here, and guards the long-handled frying pan constantly. To a second he knows the time when its contents will be done just right. Paul's "Oh, hustle 'em up, Bill," and Dave's assertion that, yielding to the pangs of hunger, he could "eat the greaser," are both a waste of words so far as hastening by one second the lifting of the long-handled pan, or in the least disturbing the zealous cook's equanimity are concerned.

The package of substantial accompaniments to the fish,—bread and butter, young onions, pickles, and for dessert, fried cakes and cheese —has for sometime been opened and spread upon the little table. The paper wrappings,

so much more easily disposed of than a basket, have been reduced to ashes. Only the fish and coffee are wanting. Even before Phil can return with a bucket of fresh water from the spring, however, the whole dinner is ready, and in a twinkling every one of the four is doing ample, not to say severe, justice thereto.

"Needn't get your feet in the trough!" Dave MacLester admonishes, as Paul Jones gasps and struggles over a bone.

"Was just about to say to you that this is no fifty-yard dash eating contest," the latter retorts good-naturedly.

"We ought to get that money Binski owes us on the way back," suggests Phil, who has been thinking of business.

"Sure! 'Ev-e-ry lit-tle bit, add-ed to—'" Billy starts to sing a song he doesn't know but thinks he does, and is quickly interrupted.

Then the talk goes to the subject of automobiles. It is one that has claimed much attention of late. Two weeks have passed since the little business meeting in which the purchase

Billy Worth is master of ceremonies and guards the long-handled frying pan constantly.

of a car was first seriously mentioned. Two weeks of planning, inquiring, pricing and investigating.

"Now, how much straight, cold cash have the youngsters got?" Frank Knight, of Knight & Wilder, the most extensive automobile dealers and garage keepers in Lannington, had finally asked.

Phil told him.

"I'll sell you a car—a bang-up, smooth running, four cylinder, five passenger machine, on one condition," the elder man had continued thoughtfully after a minute's reflection. "You are to go into this Star Lake passenger service venture in earnest; you must charge sixty-five cents one way, or a dollar round trip; average two round trips every day but Saturdays and Sundays and three trips on Saturdays. There will be nothing doing on Sundays. You are to get a hundred dollars for the season, payable by the month, from the Brush hotel at the Lake. Of course, you will charge fair prices for pack-

ages or express matter of any kind, like letters and so forth."

"What we have planned is just about the same as you suggest!" Phil answered. "But how about the price of the car? We can't make money enough to buy an expensive one, and—Well, if it isn't a good one, we couldn't make it pay for itself anyway, we've come to that conclusion."

"This is the machine, right here," was the answer. "She's a beauty. Run some last fall, but couldn't be in better shape. Just took it in to-day on a trade for a new car of the same make and we'll let it go for next to nothing, for if we keep it some fellow will come along that otherwise would buy a new machine, and snap it up. We'd lose the sale of a car that we'd make our regular commission on. Now that's between ourselves," Mr. Knight concluded in a confidential tone.

The senior member of the firm of Knight & Wilder was at any time an affable, pleasant fellow, but to Phil and Dave, who were talking

with him on this occasion, he seemed like a prince. And he in turn smiled most cordially as he noted the sparkling eyes of his customers.

"We ought to have a great deal over a thousand dollars for this machine. It's hardly been run at all—just enough to get broken nicely. Cost a lot more than that, new. Look at the leather upholstering! Ain't a spot on it! Look at the engine!" and the young man,—he was scarcely more than a youth, himself,—threw open the bonnet. "Wait, I'll show you how she runs," and he adjusted the spark and gave the crank a turn.

But well he knew how unnecessary were his selling arguments. He could see it in the eager faces of both the boys. Never were there customers more anxious to buy or more willing to accept every representation as fact.

"We'll have Doc Way in to look her over, and Billy, tell your father to come in, too! He's a man that knows a good machine, I'll bet! No, sir, sons, I wouldn't string you for the world! I like your spunk and your nerve

and it's precious few years since I was doctoring machinery over there in Dunkley's shop, and figuring how to get along, myself. Your Star Lake scheme sounds good. I'll risk getting my money on it, and if you'll raise me two hundred and fifty, I'll stand you off on the joint note of the four of you for four hundred dollars for four months."

"It all sounds soft and pleasant and we could easily get the first payment together, but—well, business is business, and we can't afford to be in a hurry," was the substance of the answer Phil and Billy gave, to which Mr. Knight replied:

"Take your time; sure, take your time, but—now I don't say this to hurry you up, at all, or make you think I want your thanks—the simple fact is, though, that even on a better price than I've offered you this machine will sell in no time and for spot cash. I really want you boys to have it, if you want it, that's all; but I won't urge you, not for a minute."

The net result of this conversation was that

Dr. Way, Phil's father, and also Mr. MacLester and Mr. Worth went around to the garage at the first opportunity and looked the car over. None of them owned an automobile but Dr. Way was tolerably familiar with the merits of different types, and Mr. Worth, being a manufacturer of wood-working devices, had a good knowledge of machinery. As for Mr. MacLester, who was a commission merchant, he stated frankly that he couldn't tell a steering knuckle from a spark plug; which, though an exaggeration, of course, really illustrated the extent of his automobile knowledge, or the lack of it, pretty well, too.

"I'm very well impressed with the car, but ordinarily I should say that there is something wrong somewhere or no such absurdly low price and terms would be made upon it," said Dr. Way, as the three men walked down the street after finishing the inspection. "I'm even more favorably impressed with this man Knight. I believe he's on the level."

"He is. I've known him for a number of

years," said Mr. Worth. "Until the beginning of the automobile business he hoed a hard row; but he has made money fast in the past few years and I am convinced he is making the boys a really generous proposition. I can see no other motive than that he just naturally fancies doing so."

In the opinions thus expressed Mr. MacLester acquiesced but he suggested that it was not, perhaps, just the thing for the fathers of these same boys to encourage Mr. Knight in extending so marked a favor, or the lads, themselves, in accepting it.

"Pride, MacLester, nothing but pride to stand in the way," laughed the doctor, whose ample girth and sparkling eye fully signified his comfortable disposition.

"I've encouraged all the boys in their little business affairs and in putting away their money," put in Mr. Worth. "I don't want to see them squander their savings now; but we all learn by experience, Doctor. We all have to gather knowledge by costly methods, as a

rule, Mr. MacLester, and for my part I am willing to leave the whole matter in the hands of the four of them and trust to Providence that they don't blow themselves up or break their necks."

"Oh, they've settled all objections from the view point of possible danger with their mothers long ago," laughed the doctor. "Delightful rides they have promised them, too! No, we can hardly withhold our sanction on that score. They are remarkable young fellows, and I say it in all seriousness. Your suggestion, Worth, is in my opinion a good one. I vote aye on it, at once."

"Well, well, with one friend who can doctor them, if necessary, and another who can doctor their machine and take his chance of getting his pay for the car he sells them, I suppose it will be all right," Mr. MacLester assented smilingly. Which little pleasantry, coming from him, was quite remarkable, also, for he was the kind of man who takes all things seriously. Still, his remark clinched the favorable verdict

which in due time came to the anxious quartette in waiting. In substance it was:

"This shall be your own affair. You have made a success of your enterprises so far, but do not be spoiled by prosperity or become reckless with yourselves, or with your money, now or any time. Be sure you appreciate the fact that you are assuming a debt which will have to be paid when it falls due. And if you buy this car be sure that the knowledge that you are thoughtful and careful is the best thing you can leave with those at home whenever you are going away, whether for an hour or a day."

Each boy received at dinner the final opinion upon which their elders had agreed. Paul heard the good news from his sister. Dr. Way made it a point to stop and tell her of the inspection of the car and the result thereof, not only because she was interested, but because it would smooth the way for Paul's uninterrupted participation in the happiness in prospect. It was a little act of kindness for the like of which—and plenty of them in Paul's behalf

—the recording angel had placed many a bright mark to the doctor's credit. For, be it known, Paul's sister, whose name by marriage was Wilby, did not particularly favor boys in general. Bless the heart that unconsciously placed a higher valuation on quiet and spotless cleanliness, though she thought she was kind, indeed, to the motherless lad,—she meant to be. Give her credit for that.

Billy Worth telephoned to Phil, and Phil to Dave. The latter stopped for Paul on the way to the usual rendezvous,—the headquarters of the Young American Company under the elms —and never was there a more enthusiastic meeting. Five minutes later all were on the way to Knight & Wilder's garage.

"Demonstration? Sure thing! Pile in!" exclaimed the affable senior partner, and in about twenty seconds the trim touring car was whirling away up the street, into the park and then to the country for a test on rougher roads and hills.

Billy Worth laughed gleefully that his agility

had won him the seat beside the driver. The other three were in the tonneau and Mr. Knight was at the wheel. Pleasant? Yes. Delightful beyond description? Yes, and still yes to the most extravagant measure of joy that could be mentioned.

Never were there more attentive pupils than the four chums when Mr. Knight, jolly as any of them, stopped the car and explained parts of its mechanism, pointing out its good qualities and improvements over other constructions, and all just as if he were afraid he might lose the sale otherwise.

"We'll buy the car on the terms you proposed the other day," the lads told him then and there.

"Let me make a suggestion," was the answer. "We don't want any premature explosions in this deal. Take time. To-day is Thursday. If you boys still want the car on Monday morning, bring in your money and we will close the bargain."

And so it was agreed. And so, on Friday, the

boys again and again undertook to hold serious conference on the question whether they really did wish to make the purchase or not. What a waste of breath! And so, on Saturday, as has been seen, there came the expedition to the woods to get the Forest Ranger money. A little fishing and a dinner at the Retreat were side issues.

But the clouds are rising fast and faster now, casting their shadows on the days to come. And some are bright and rosy tinted, but some are black and threatening and there are dangers and trouble, as well as happiness, in the omens they bear for the four young friends, though none can read them.

CHAPTER IV

"DON'T BLAB IT"

The tin box containing the treasure of the Forest Rangers was hidden beneath a great boulder not many yards from the cave. The removal of a smaller rock, lying close beside the large one, revealed the crude little casket tucked away snug and dry in a bed of sand and gravel.

There was no sign that the hiding-place or the money itself had been tampered with when the four chums, making certain they were not watched, and walking softly and speaking in whispers, visited the spot and carried the box, still unopened, to the Retreat. Great was their amazement, then, to discover a loss of twenty-two dollars from their hoard.

"We will count it again," said Phil Way, calmly, but very soberly.

Thirty-six dollars. No power short of magic could make the sum greater. One ten and four five-dollar gold coins, eight half-dollars and two silver dollars there were; no more and no less.

"It beats thunder!" ejaculated Paul Jones. "Wait! I know just what's gone—a ten-dollar gold piece, two fives and two dollars silver!"

"Let's look in the sand under the rock," cried Billy Worth, hurrying away to do so.

"But how could any money fall out of that box?" demanded Dave, with energy, as all followed.

No money had fallen out of the box—not into the sand and gravel beneath or near the giant boulder, at least. A long search was wholly fruitless.

"It beats thunder!" declared Paul, very forcibly, for the twentieth time.

"Who ever could have taken it?" Billy Worth inquired again and again.

But no amount of questioning could solve the mystery and even Phil, himself, could offer not even a suggestion.

Dave was angry and showed it, but the others were too mystified to give vent to their feelings in a similar manner. It might have been less of a puzzle had all the money been taken. Why anyone disposed to steal should help himself merely to part of the hoard seemed strange. How the thief could have chanced to discover the treasure which had been so carefully concealed and guarded was likewise a question none could answer.

"It looks as if they planned to leave something for a nest-egg, thinking we would come again and put more in the box without discovering that any had been taken," Phil thoughtfully observed at last. "And we're mighty lucky, after all," he continued, "that only twenty-two dollars were taken. We will still be able to get enough together for the automobile, all right."

"Some consolation in that, too," murmured Billy.

"It don't put the twenty-two back, though," growled Dave so dejectedly that Paul burst out:

"Oh, Mac, forget it! Sam Hill! We ain't the first business concern that ever had burglars!"

But Dave still fussed and growled. However, neither his fuming nor Billy Worth's random, wondering remarks could do the least good and as the shadows deepened in the woods the boys were glad to lock the door of the hut and start homeward.

There was something oppressive and foreboding in the gloom of the valley since the knowledge had been forced upon the lads that spying eyes and thieving hands might be there. So, with much greater quiet than usual, and many looks in all directions, they betook themselves to the road leading into town. Here their spirits noticeably revived and the more so as their conversation turned from their loss to the prospective automobile.

Collections on the newspaper route and from other sources had put enough money at the young company's command so that they hoped still to muster the initial payment required by

Knight & Wilder. It would be difficult, at best, however, and the worst of it was the lack of funds to buy a reasonable supply of gasoline, oil, and other supplies. That the boys felt keenly the loss of so considerable part of their savings, notwithstanding, was but natural. All humanity is prone to take misfortune much to heart instead of finding a ray of comfort and room for thankfulness in the thought that any bad situation might be worse.

Phil Way and Paul were the first to brighten up in the face of the trouble and the latter having, in imagination, already executed his vow that he would "take a few pokes" at the guilty party or parties, whenever they should be discovered, was really quite himself again.

"We've just *got* to get that two seventy-five from Binski now," Paul declared. "We can skip over to the other road, stop at his place and still get home before dark."

"S'pose we do it," Billy Worth assented. "Joe Fasser's going to carry the papers tonight, anyway."

As there was no necessity of the boys' reaching home before nightfall, inasmuch as a substitute had been engaged to look after the newspaper route, the opportunity seemed especially favorable for a call on Mr. Binski. It was Saturday, too, and the peddler would most certainly have some money. His worn-out excuse that he could not pay the debt, though anxious to do so, would hardly serve this time.

For Binski was a small truck gardener and huckster combined. He peddled not only his own produce but much that he bought, as well, in Lannington, and long years of work in one locality had made him quite well known, if not well liked. Popular rumor had it that Binski was rich; that he had large sums hidden about the ramshackle little house in which he lived alone, and elsewhere on his premises.

However, if this were true, he had kept the fact well concealed and particularly so from the four lads who, on several occasions, the preceding autumn, had helped him by delivering fruit to his customers. Try as they would, they had

been unable to obtain the compensation agreed upon. The uncouth old fellow always pleaded hard times and poverty.

The huckster's place was situated upon a little-used and lonely road. About a mile from the city it forked off the main thoroughfare, which was the road the boys were now traversing. To reach his home by the most direct route, then, it was necessary to go a half mile across the fields. They would go from there into town by way of the unfrequented road, and so not have to journey very far out of their course.

Not very sanguine over the probable results of the visit, but anxious to collect the money if possible, Phil led the way over the low stone fence and through the fields. The route lay across a pasture, over another fence, then through a stretch of woodland, the opposite edge of which bordered the old peddler's patch of early corn, and commanded a view of his unpainted and desolate looking house and farm.

A tall thin man, with a heavy, drooping mous-

tache, his slouch hat pulled down over his forehead and his coat collar turned up about his neck, although the weather was warm, sat on a log in the midst of the woodland as the four friends came among the trees. He noticed their approach, apparently, when they were still some distance from him, and walked unconcernedly away. His direction took him well out of the boys' path and they did not get a good look at him.

The man seemed to be carrying a halter over his arm but in the twilight it was impossible to determine definitely. For the matter of that, the lads gave him little attention. Some horses were grazing in the distance and very likely he was come to take one of them to his barn, as any other farmer, or his hired man, might do. However, if the boys gave the tall, slouching fellow little heed, he gave them even less for he did once look toward them and very soon the gathering gloom had hidden him from view.

Binski, the huckster, had just driven into his ill-kept farmyard as his youthful creditors

clambered over the fence beside the barn. Two young shotes, waiting to be fed, were squealing in their pen, but otherwise the premises were as quiet as any place could be on a pleasant June evening.

The huckster seemed to have come directly from the city, for his horse was hitched in the wagon he always used for peddling. Clearly the old fellow must have money for the vehicle, so laden with produce when seen in town, was wholly empty now.

"Now we've got to stand up strong for our rights and I guess we can get at least part of that money," said Phil in an undertone, partially to his companions, but more to himself. Then he added: "Drop that club, Paul, we don't want to appear unfriendly. We've got to be civil and diplomatic."

Paul threw down a heavy hickory stick he had cut and was carrying home to make into a bow, just as Phil sang out cordially, "Hello, Mr. Binski," and Dave and Billy did the same.

"You kids git out o' here. Ain't I told youse

I don't got no money? Git out! Git out!" The huckster's voice was loud and threatening. Instantly he assumed a defensive attitude with his back to his horse, still hitched to the wagon.

Whether his fright was due to his having seen the club in Paul's hands, or just to the cowardice of his miserly nature would be hard to say. Most likely the latter was the case. Paul had dropped his stick immediately on getting over the fence.

"I don't get a tollar dis whole day. I don't got no money," the peddler cried again. "Git out from dis!"

"Like fun, you ain't," cried Paul, considerably roiled. "We've heard that song too many times! You've got to shell out now!"

"Oh, hush up, Paul," the leader of the four commanded, and speaking again to the huckster, who, at young Jones' words had seized a stub of horse-whip from the wagon, he urged: "Look here, Mr. Binski, we don't want anything but fair play. We didn't come here for

any fuss or trouble, but we did come for the money you've owed us too long already. Surely you've got a few dollars! Won't you pay *part* now, at least? Come! You're a good business man, you want to pay your honest bills. You expect your customers to pay you and they do. Give us half our bill now and we'll let the rest go till—till almost any time. That's reasonable."

"Git out o' here! Git out o' here! You kids better git out from dis! I don't got no money, an' I told you so enough times." Binski was almost screaming and his angry voice and manner, as he brandished the whip toward the boys, was enough to try anyone's patience.

"All right for you, then," Phil Way cried harshly, his temper getting the better of him. "You'll have a law suit on *your* hands, and it'll cost you enough more than two dollars and seventy-five cents, you'll see!"

Billy Worth and Dave joined in with vigorous assent to Phil's righteous outburst, and emboldened by their language, Paul Jones,

brave as a lion, advanced toward the stub of horse-whip, shaking his fist, "Who's afraid of your old gad, you low-down dead-beat? I've a notion to take a fall out of you, and I'll find some money good and quick if I do."

From yelling, "Git out o' here, git out o' here," the old fellow in a rage of both fright and anger now turned his words to, "Help, help! Murder, murder! Help!" and he was still hoarsely screaming when Phil led the way out of the yard. With a parting shot quite like his former threat, Paul followed his three friends, and coming into the unfrequented road they headed toward the city and home.

Although angry and provoked over the actions and the meanness of the huckster, the boys had, in the automobile which was to be theirs in another day but one, too pleasant a subject of conversation to long continue talking of the contemptible fellow. They did promise themselves to take counsel with their patron, Daniel Dilworth, concerning a suit against Binski, however, and there they left the matter.

The theft from the strong box of the Forest Rangers was a topic which also claimed attention just now. Quite calmly the boys talked it all over and gradually became somewhat reconciled to their loss. Most unfortunately indeed, as it turned out later, an agreement was made to say nothing about its disappearance at their homes, for a time, at least.

Youth and hope are very nearly synonymous. Somehow the lads believed they might yet find the missing money. This was partially due to Billy Worth's suggestion that, like as not, a squirrel or chipmunk, attracted by the smell of crackers still lingering in the box, had carried the coins away.

Of course it might be. The possibility afforded ground for hope. The utter impossibility that any animal could have removed the tight lid from the double box and replaced it again, was not the popular view of the question. Even the certain difficulty of finding where the tiny thieves had concealed the money, supposing they had taken it, was one much

more willingly considered. This possessed some trace of hopefulness. Obviously, no animal would eat either gold or silver.

So nothing was to be said of the loss, at once. It was agreed that Phil should keep in charge the thirty-six dollars safely in hand, and that another visit must be made to the woods the following afternoon. If success attended the trip, all would be well; but even if the further search ended in disappointment, that automobile should be purchased. Just as soon as the banks were open, and money in them could be withdrawn on Monday morning, the necessary two hundred and fifty dollars would be mustered, even if an advance must be obtained from some few good customers. Thus with light hearts, despite the day's happenings, the lads separated for the night.

Although they were in one class at day school, the four friends were divided when it came to Sunday school. That all did attend Sunday school, at one church or another, however, was due, perhaps, quite as much to motherly and

sisterly persuasion, as to the personal inclinations on their part. But let it suffice to say that they not only observed the Sabbath in this way but in others. In no case, though, was there any objection to the boys taking a walk into the country on a Sunday afternoon.

"It's just about one chance in a million that we'll ever find a cent of that money," observed Phil Way thoughtfully, as the quartette tramped toward the woods.

"Don't *you* be a croaker, Phil, for pity's sake," urged Billy. "Bad enough for Dave to ——"

"Why, I haven't said a word!" expostulated MacLester. "I only hope we *will* find every penny. Still I'll bet a small farm, we won't. Tell you what, though! First fellow to find any part of that twenty-two dollars gets the first turn at the wheel of the car to-morrow!"

"Go ye," chirped Paul, confidently, and the others agreed.

The small treasure chest, as a matter of habit, perhaps, had been returned to its hiding-place

and concealed, as usual, after the removal of its contents and the long search of the day before. With curiously mingled feelings of pain, despair, and hope, the lads again rolled the smaller stone aside and drew the double tin box forth. It was in Phil's hands.

"Now, see," he said, "this lid comes off pretty hard, after all." It took a strong tug of his fingers to pull the cover loose. "Great guns! Here's our money, now!" he cried.

And it was true, and more than true, for instead of twenty-two dollars in the little metal chest the sum was forty-four. This fact was discovered in even less time than it takes to tell it.

More mystified even than when their loss was found out the day before, the boys looked at one another in astonishment.

"Say, don't it beat anything you ever heard of, though?" exclaimed Paul.

"But what's this? See here!" cried Billy at the same instant, and he picked a closely folded bit of paper from a crack in the dried clay

separating the inner box from the outer one. "There's writing in it," he added excitedly. Keen with interest, the four lads bent their heads over the message scrawled on a small piece of ordinary notepaper.

> "I give you back your money and interest on it. You ought to be satisfied, if I am. *Don't blab it.*"

Very mixed indeed were the sensations of the boys as they read the unevenly penciled lines again and again. In vain they sought a solution of the puzzle. The cat-birds, calling plaintively from the thickets in the valley below, would have succeeded as well. The creek, which seemed always to be whispering of mysteries and strange secrets as its dark waters slipped onward, could have told as much.

There was more than one question for the boys to answer. It was not only: Who put this money here? but also, Have we a right to take it?

Paul and Dave both thought the latter question an easy one. Phil and Billy were doubt-

ful, and the more so because of the note's injunction, "Don't blab it."

"Somebody found the box and took some of our Ranger money. Somebody found out that we had discovered it, and put the cash back in a hurry, and more with it to save himself trouble," said Dave. "Of course we don't know who, unless, maybe it was old Gleason himself."

"That sounds reasonable enough, Mac, but it's only guess work after all," Phil insisted. "I don't know why anyone could want to make trouble for us, I'm sure, but—Well, it's blamed seldom that anybody passes out twenty-two dollars without some pretty good reasons. I don't feel as good over it as I would if we had just found our own money and no more."

"It's not the same money that was stolen from the box, at any rate," observed Billy. "We didn't have any quarters, nor any paper money!"

" 'Don't blab it'," repeated Phil slowly, as if he would learn from the words themselves just

why the writer desired secrecy. "'Don't blab it', 'Don't blab it.' "

As he spoke a little eddy of wind suddenly picked up the note left lying on the larger stone. High in the air the paper circled, then floated gently lower into the valley and was lost to view in the tops of the trees of the bottom land.

"We should have held onto that writing," said Dave, rather seriously. "Chase after it, Paul."

Jones did as he was asked, but came back empty handed.

"Oh well, hardly anybody comes to these woods, and that note wouldn't mean anything if it should be found by someone," Billy Worth quickly remarked, lest Phil should propose that all go in search.

But Phil made no such proposal. The extreme convenience of having an excess of money in the treasury, in view of the purchase to be made on the morrow, appealed to him very much, even though it worried him.

"Come along," he said at last, "We'll keep

the money till we find someone having a better right to it, anyhow. Maybe Dave is right. Leastwise, we'll wait and see. It's a pretty good sign that the money was honestly intended for us, and is all right, when the man who found our box and could have taken all we had, didn't do so; and that he returned what he did take, and more, too."

"And mind you, 'don't blab it,'" Dave put in, half in jest, half in earnest.

Little he thought how likely it was that not only he, himself, but his friends would be called upon to tell everything in their power concerning the strange discovery. "Don't blab it," he repeated a dozen times on the homeward way, little suspecting how very soon they all would hear the words again. Paul took up the phrase, too, and in an hour it had become quite a by-word among the lads.

Slowly they strolled homeward in the soft light and grateful coolness of the late Sunday afternoon. Not this time did they go through the fields to the huckster's house. Not this time

did they cross over to the unfrequented road. And for another night the squealing pigs must go supperless, and for another night must the patient, hungry, old white horse stand through the long hours, still hitched to the peddler's wagon before the tumble-down barn.

CHAPTER V

THE MOST FUN YET

Monday morning. The town has on its work-day clothes again. Men go hurrying to their offices, stores and factories. Friends exchange greetings as they pass. Every second man who speaks, on a fair average, says, "Beautiful morning," or something to the same effect. If the weather were modest it would certainly blush red as the roses, blooming everywhere, to hear itself so praised.

But, truly, it is a beautiful morning. A slight shower over night has cooled the air to an ideal temperature and made the trees and the grass and shrubbery on the lawns and in the parks most bright and lovely. Almost any morning in early June can be put in the beautiful class without examination, but this particular Monday morning, with its delightfully soft, sweet

air, and just enough breeze—not a zephyr too much nor a zephyr too little—why, even the usually gloomy old milk-man, a chronic fault-finder with the weather, says, "Beautiful morning" to the maid at the kitchen door. The bleary-eyed and hungry umbrella mender, loitering on a bench in the park groans, "Beautiful morning" to himself. The very birds sing "beautiful morning" all around.

"Fine and dandy morning," says young Mr. Knight, of Knight & Wilder, jumping out of a big, racy looking automobile—a runabout with a rumble seat—as he drives into the garage. He has varied the usual form somewhat, but he means "beautiful morning" just the same.

Still, he need hardly have said anything of the kind. If it had been a damp, foggy, chilly morning it would have been a glorious morning notwithstanding to those whom he addressed, and there are no two ways about it. The Auto Boys were at the garage to buy their car. They had looked the machine all over. So powerful,

so roomy and handsome! It seemed too good to be true.

"Been waiting long? I'm just a little late, maybe," said Mr. Knight.

"Oh, that's all right," Phil Way returned,—the boys had been at the garage since seven o'clock and it was now eight. "We thought we'd drop around and tell you we've concluded to buy the car."

"Glad to hear it," said Mr. Knight briskly. "Reckoned you'd be here and I've had her put in tip-top shape from crank handle to number plate. Got the money with you?"

"Some of it," Phil answered, displaying a pretty fat wallet in a sort of carelessly business-like way. "But we've got to go around to the bank,—it's open by this time, and we'll be right back."

"I'll look over my mail, then, get your papers ready to sign up and find Wilder to take the machine out for you and show you how to run her," Mr. Knight replied, with gay briskness.

"I hope you'll keep your account here when

you start your Star Lake passenger service," said Mr. Dayville, paying teller at the Savings Bank, as he counted out the boys' money. Mr. Stang, at the First National, was equally pleasant when the lads told of their plans and their object in withdrawing their deposit.

Up to this time the four friends had said nothing save in their own homes of their expectation of buying an automobile. "There's many a slip," and it were wiser not to say much about uncertainties. But now,—now, when in another quarter of an hour the car would be in their possession,—right pleasant, indeed, it was to be able to say:

"We're getting an automobile—four cylinder touring car. Going to use it some for a passenger service to Star Lake. Regular trips every day but Sundays, starting from Auditorium Park. Hop in with us when you're going out that way. Fishing's fine, they say."

Young Mr. Knight was a business-like chap and well used to doing things up in a quick, snappy way; but he was somewhat surprised,

nevertheless, to find Phil, Dave and Paul back at the garage before he had his desk fairly open, a cigar lighted and his letters out of the envelopes. But he put other matters aside, counted the two hundred and fifty dollars the boys placed before him, and filled in a blank note for four hundred dollars payable four months from date with interest at six per cent.

"Now, then, just put your John Hancock on this, Phil and Billy, and all of you," he said, handing over the note to be signed, "and you will be the owners of the best five passenger touring car, lamps, horn, tool kit and all accessories, ever sold at any thing like the price. Side entrance tonneau, thirty horse-power, four-cylinder engine, long wheel base, chain drive, sliding gear,—a crackerjack of a machine that has been run just enough to demonstrate that she's there with the goods on all roads and all grades, in any weather, and will bring you back just as easily as she takes you out, without a skip or miss, or so much as a cross word any time.

"By George! You're lucky youngsters!" young Mr. Knight went on enthusiastically, while the lads were signing their names. "If you don't have the times of your lives with that car I'm a wooden man, and I wish—"

At this juncture Mr. Wilder, the junior partner, came into the little office. Mr. Wilder represented the mechanical side of the firm, while Mr. Knight looked after the sales.

"Ed," said Mr. Knight to Mr. Wilder, breaking off suddenly from the wish he had not yet expressed, "where is that extra baggage outfit those tourists left here last fall as security for gasoline? Can't we find it and let our Auto Boys have the use of it? Just the thing for packages they'll have to carry for themselves and in their Star Lake business."

Mr. Wilder was of the opinion that Mr. Knight was "shouting right." At least those were the words he used; and also that the outfit was in the shop, and he'd be glad to see the same put to such good use.

"Very fine!" said young Mr. Knight in his

brisk, pleasant way. "Now, Ed, that Thirty is sold, signed, sealed and delivered and if you'll give the new owners a few instructions, I'll get after this mail, then I must shoot up and give Judge Crossley a demonstration. I'll close him for a new car if we can get delivery in time."

In his quick, pleasant manner of speaking, Mr. Knight had given his customers but little opportunity to talk. They had succeeded in thanking both members of the firm for the offer of the baggage outfit, and now expressed themselves as ready at any time to receive instructions in operating the car.

Among themselves, as they were left alone for a minute, the boys agreed that Mr. Knight was a "whirlwind," and a "live wire," whatever these may be, and also "white all the way through," which, no doubt, will be properly understood as meaning very agreeable, fair and square. Still they were glad, too, that Mr. Wilder, rather than his more brisk and entertaining partner, was to show them the mysteries of running the automobile. He was a

calm, slow, steady fellow who would not attempt to tell everything in ten minutes, say "There you are, sleek as a whistle," and expect his pupils to have grasped it all.

However, when Mr. Wilder had removed his overalls and jumper, preparatory to taking Thirty and its new owners out, he had no need to complain of lack of attentiveness on the boys' part as he began the instructions. He showed them how to look the car over to see that everything was in good order with plenty of gasoline, plenty of oil and plenty of water in their respective places and the gear thrown out. Then he showed them how to turn on the gasoline, just how the spark did its work to cause the explosions in the cylinders, and how these explosions were the power that moved the machine.

Of course he told much that the boys already knew. They had not been interested in automobiles two years or more without knowing really a great deal about them. Any of the four could have told you the make of every car you

might see in a week's journey. Any one of them could have told off-hand the rated horse-power of all the different types of the best known makes of machines and in most instances the number of cylinders, the cooling system, and, perhaps, the listed selling price.

"But the best learning is the actual experience. Take the wheel, one of you," said Mr. Wilder.

"Your turn first, Phil. You know why," said Dave.

Phil took the driver's seat. Billy Worth and Paul started to enter the tonneau, but Mr. Wilder stopped them. "All four of you in front," he said. "Get on the running board—anywhere—but so you can see the wheel and the levers and pedals, and not be in the way. I'll have the tonneau to myself, but look over your shoulders and see that we don't wreck ourselves or anybody else. Here now, start your spark first. Now crank her up. I'll tell you how, but you must do the work."

Billy sprang to the front of the car and under

Mr. Wilder's guidance started the motor. Then Mr. Wilder showed them just how to throw the clutch and as easily as a boat slips away from the wharf, the big car moved forward and out of the garage. Billy had just time to get a place on the running board, and Mr. Wilder to spring into the tonneau.

As readily, almost, as if he had operated a car from infancy, Phil steered up the street and at a moderate speed headed for Auditorium Park, a tract of considerable extent whose main entrance was quite in the heart of the town and not far from Knight & Wilder's establishment. Reaching the park, with a long, unobstructed road, smooth as a floor, stretching away ahead of him, Phil ventured to use the high gear and away the Thirty went like a bird.

"This is *great!*" laughed the young driver in a burst of ecstacy. It was surely the most delightful moment of his life.

Nor were his companions any the less pleased. True, they did not have the supreme pleasure of gripping the wheel, and feeling the heart-throbs

of the powerful machine, nor the wonderful sense of joy and satisfaction in holding all this power and energy in one's own hands, to move to the right or to the left, to increase or decrease, to go onward or backward, to stop or to start, at will. But this happiness was theirs a little later.

And what happiness! Oh, sons of men, whether you are fifteen or whether you are fifty, you have not known every exquisite rapture that life contains if you have never held the wheel of an automobile—your own automobile, preferably, but an automobile well built and powerful, no matter whose.

"It's the most fun I ever had in *my* life," cried Phil with enthusiasm when presently he slowed down and stopped the car.

"Jimminy! If Phil Way's so tickled, what will Paul do?" cried Billy Worth, as Jones prepared to occupy the driver's seat. "He'll swell up and explode entirely, I'll bet!" And it looked almost a safe wager. In all their lives the boys had never seen quiet, undemonstrative

Phil Way so bubbling over with excitement and happiness.

But Paul kept cool, drove carefully and conservatively, and although a broad smile spread itself over all his face, his cheeks were flushed and he felt just the least bit frightened. He gained self-confidence rapidly however, and, "Say, this *is* great," he sang out presently, and so very enthusiastically that the other boys laughed with him in his delight.

Mr. Wilder enjoyed the experience nearly as much as any of them and was wishing the senior partner could have been present. Knight had particularly fancied the Auto Boys, as he had called them. How he would have relished the sight of their boundless happiness in the big car!

Dave took the third turn at the wheel and was as pleased as could be. Yet he would not have been David McLeod MacLester had he expressed only his happiness. "If she only had *six* cylinders," he said, half complainingly.

"Well if that ain't just like you, Dave!" exclaimed Billy. And in truth it was.

As for the son of Mr. Charles William Worth, that young gentleman really came nearer the danger named as threatening Paul than did the latter. Naturally reckless and buoyant, the keen delight of holding the wheel moved him to such exquisite happiness that, as the thought came to him, "We'd ought to be very, very thankful for this," he felt a little catching in his throat as if he were going to cry. But he checked the sentimental feeling, and cried out with an odd little laugh, "Great? Why, there never *was* anything like it!"

All about the park, around the residence streets of the city and then into the country to Star Lake, five miles away and back again, the car and its rapturous new owners went, and when at last they drew up at Knight & Wilder's garage, Mr. Wilder said: "I've every confidence in you, boys. The only thing is, don't be reckless. Don't take chances. Take good care of the machine and you'll get all the ser-

vice out of this car that you'll want. Use plenty of oil. Keep the tires pumped up good and hard. Don't abuse the engine by over-loading or over-heating, for want of water or anything else. Let us know how you get on, too. Where will you keep her?"

Mr. Wilder always used the feminine gender when speaking of the car, just as Mr. Knight did, and as a great many others do. The boys told him they would take care of "her" themselves, for the present at least, and that they were fixing up a place at Dr. Way's as their garage. The truth was they planned to devote the green and yellow shed to the automobile's requirements. Work to this end had been under way as early as five o'clock that morning.

The business headquarters of the Young American company was, in fact, well adapted to the uses of the Auto Boys' Express and Transportation Company. By cutting a large door in the rear wall of the building, it was easily entered with the car by way of the alley at the back of Dr. Way's premises. An extra window

in the west wall would give an abundance of light and there was room along the east wall for a work bench. Along the front wall there was space for the little desk, the lawn-mowers and other paraphernalia and tools belonging to the Young American concern.

It was nearly noon when the boys, with a stock of gasoline and oil, were ready to leave Knight & Wilder's place. Phil telephoned home that they would be up directly, and was told to bring the other boys to lunch with him. This, of course, was very convenient for it would have been a hardship, indeed, for any of the lads to have been separated from the automobile long enough to go home for a meal just at this period. So to Phil's home they all went and as the Fates had planned it, the three members of the "Grand Syndicate" were coming down the street just as Billy turned the car to drive in the alley.

Now the Grand Syndicate was composed of Percy Hassett, a bright enough sort of chap in his way, but a sour one, too; Fred Perth, a jolly

young lad of fourteen, who might have been in better company; and Sam Carew. The latter was their leader. He was a lively, quick-witted fellow, strong, clever and in many respects likable had it not been for his utter disregard of truth and his silly and absurdly extravagant bragging.

"Gay sports!" called Fred Perth. "Whose is it?"

"Belongs to the gang," Billy answered quietly.

"Ain't got much power, have you?" asked Percy Hassett maliciously, but none of the owners deigned to notice him.

"My uncle in Chicago is going to send me a four-cylinder, thirty horse-power," spoke up Sam, liar and braggart, knowing he was lying when he uttered the words.

"That's what this is," Phil answered, for Billy had stopped at the alley corner and he and Paul, who were on the front seat with him, were especially enjoying the evident jealousy of Carew and his followers.

"Oh, 'tis?" exclaimed Sam with a strong touch of both surprise and scorn in his tones. "I wouldn't have a four-cylinder; not enough power. It's a six-cylinder I'm getting. Been ordered this long time but deliveries are so blamed slow! 'Bout all you can get right off is second-hand junk."

"Bird in the hand is worth two from relations three hundred miles away," piped up Paul in his shrill, lively voice. "Come on, Bill." And Worth started up like a professional, for the engine had not been stopped, of course.

"Pretty *bum* car, that, all I've got to say," called Sam.

"Don't you be afraid that you'll be asked to ride in it," retorted Dave over the back of the tonneau, as the wheels crunched safely over the alley cinders.

But verily, "pride goeth before a fall," and fast and faster the clouds are rising, and those of rosy tint and fleeciness in which the four friends have basked this morning, are giving away to others dark and sombre.

CHAPTER VI

A DISCOVERY AND A SUSPICION

The beautiful morning had grown into a beautiful day. The influence of its sweetness was in the delighted hearts of the Auto Boys as they washed up for lunch.

Mrs. Way, fond of all the boys, and most pleasant and hospitable always, had prepared an unusually nice repast for them, and although they had been having too much fun to think of being hungry, they found their appetites instantly when they sat down to the strawberries, sandwiches, salad and delicious iced drinks in plenty.

Naturally, Mrs. Way was much interested in the automobile. Dr. Way, also, had to hear of the morning's experiences before returning to his office. There was so much to tell and so much to talk about at the table that it was not

until they repaired to the garage, as the green and yellow shed had even so quickly been christened, that the lads formulated their plans for the immediate future.

It would not do to run the car too constantly just for pleasure, so it was agreed to spend the afternoon putting the shed into shape. Toward evening they would take Mrs. Way, Mrs. Worth, also Billy's grown-up sister, Mrs. MacLester, and Dave's small brother, also Paul's sister, for a ride. They could not all go at once, but there was no need to drive far—just through the park and back. Then they would go to the Tribune office where, as it was their turn, Phil and Paul would drop off and do the work on the newspaper route. Billy and Dave would keep a business appointment made by 'phone with their friend, Con Cecil.

The object of the meeting with Mr. Cecil was to have in the Evening Tribune of the next day the announcement that an automobile passenger service to Star Lake would begin the day fol-

lowing—Wednesday—to continue until further notice.

Mr. Con Cecil—"Confucius" he was facetiously called by his intimates, though his proper name was Cornelius—Mr. Cornelius Cecil, then, be it known, was a reporter. He had first met Phil and his friends when he was a sort of overgrown office boy in the Tribune office and helped to count out the papers to the carriers and newsboys. Since he had risen to the dignity of a place on the reportorial staff he had seen the boys less frequently, but was always very familiar and jolly. Just a young fellow, little more than a boy himself, he was very agreeable company.

It was a part of Cecil's creed that no newspaper man could have too many friends and acquaintances. The boys of today would be the business men of tomorrow. The humblest hod-carrier might, perchance, be in a position at any time which would make his acquaintance valuable from a reporter's standpoint, at least.

And a tireless worker was Mr. Cecil. Any

hour of the day, any hour of the night, was quite alike to him. You might see his quick, slender figure and pleasant, yet very knowing expression at one place at ten o'clock and in an entirely different and distant locality no more than ten minutes later. The city editor said Cecil could smell news twenty-four hours in advance of its happening. That was a compliment he never paid any other man of his force.

As Dave and Billy would have the use of the car while Phil and Paul were at work with the papers, the latter two were assigned the not unpleasant duty of taking the ladies who have been mentioned and six-year-old Harold MacLester for their first ride in the automobile. Everything went well, needless to say. The mothers and sisters as well as Master Harold enjoyed the outing so much that very extravagant promises were made of others in the future. But at four o'clock the four boys started out by themselves again.

"S'pose I get a season pass out of this," said Cecil, merrily, as he made a note of the schedule

of the Star Lake Thirty, by which name the Auto Boys' car was to appear in the public service.

"Two of 'em," said Billy with a laugh.

"How the deuce did you youngsters get the cash to buy an automobile?" Cecil inquired interestedly. "Hard enough for me to buy shoe leather."

"Why, we had two hundred dollars in the bank and got hold of some more. Some of it we had saved up and some was,—well, some was given us," Billy returned cautiously, and hesitating toward the last. He had no wish to mention the Forest Ranger money. Quickly he guessed, too, that Cecil would be only too keen to write a full account of the strange addition to the treasure under the big rock, if he heard that story. "Don't blab it," rang in his ears. He was glad he had hesitated and kept quiet.

What Con Cecil would not have given for full particulars of the boys' interesting secret, had he suspected it, would be hard to say. What a newsy headline that would have made! And

news, strange stories, mysteries, extraordinary things of all kinds, were the reporter's passion. He scented them afar. The city editor's compliment as to his ability was an exaggeration, but it was deserved.

Cecil noted instantly the hesitation in Billy's voice. A new thought flashed upon his mind. But if he had any queer notion of his own as to the meaning of Billy Worth's apparent unwillingness to tell just where all the money for the automobile was obtained, he did not show it.

"Give your father my compliments," he said, "and tell him a friend of yours is just pining away for a buzz wagon."

"Well, Billy's father, or nobody else's father gave us the money," Dave remarked, a little exultingly.

"You boys haven't turned highwaymen or anything of that sort? But never mind, you'll soon be holding us all up! A dollar to Star Lake and back! That's downright robbery." Cecil laughed, yet watched the effect of his reference to highwaymen. He saw nothing to

confirm the thought of a bare possibility which was in his mind.

He had asked when the boys had bought the car, and many other questions, promising to give them a first-class notice on their enterprise in tomorrow's paper. He was quizzing the lads again concerning the money for the car's purchase, when a copy boy called him, saying, "Mr. Abels wants you right off." Mr. Abels was the city editor and Mr. Cecil sprang up the stairs to his call as if shot out of a catapult.

Before going home, Dave and Billy ordered some tickets in the job printing department of the Tribune office. They read: "Good For One Round Trip, Lannington and Star Lake. The Auto Boys' Express and Transportation Company."

They ordered also some cards to be displayed in store windows. These announced that the five passenger touring-car, Star Lake Thirty, would leave the main street entrance to Auditorium Park at seven thirty A. M. and two thirty P. M. each day for Star Lake. Return-

ing, leave the Lake at eight thirty A. M., and four thirty P. M., each day. The rates of fare originally agreed upon were also given, together with the sentence, "Special attention to carrying of light baggage and parcels."

A postscript stated that private parties might engage the car and a competent driver for special occasions, at times not conflicting with the Star Lake schedule, and that the offices of the Auto Boys' Express and Transportation Co. were in Worth's drug store, where tickets and complete information might at any time be had.

The down-town "office" in the drug store was not a new thing with the boys. Billy's cousin, John Worth, was the proprietor. He had allowed the lads to permit their orders to be left there long before the automobile was thought of. His establishment, being opposite the park entrance, now offered excellent advantages for the Auto Boys' purposes, and he kindly agreed to keep their tickets on sale.

Running the car slowly, Dave and Billy drove out to the vicinity of the last house on the news-

paper route and waited for Phil and Paul. The four started home together, but deciding to take just a little run into the suburbs first, they steered toward the city's extreme limits.

With clanging bells and the swift clatter of horses' feet upon the pavement, an ambulance rushed past just as the boys turned into the main street, leading to the country.

"Follow on and see where they go," cried Billy from the tonneau, to Phil Way at the wheel. The car turned in the direction the ambulance went and soon overtook the horse-drawn vehicle. But when the latter, reaching the end of the pavement, continued directly on into the country, Phil paused.

"They may be going clear out past Gleason's," he said. "We haven't time to go any further. What's the use anyway?" He turned the car around, and luxuriously enjoying the pleasant ride, the four friends moved slowly homeward.

"Maybe that ambulance is going to the Ravine for the man who left that money for us. Maybe he fell over the ledge and broke his back or

something," Billy Worth reflected aloud. His imagination was always busy—indeed, often worked over-time.

"D. B. I." spoke up Paul Jones, in an admonitory tone.

"What's D. B. I., anyhow?" demanded Dave. Paul would have answered, but Phil's response came first: "Don't blab it," he said. It was without turning his eyes from the road before him that he spoke and he pitched his tones to a high key.

"Don't blab what?" sounded a voice almost at his elbow. In surprise every boy looked quickly to the speaker. That person was Con Cecil. He was riding a bicycle and very much out of breath.

Plainly, he had been pedalling hard for some distance; but as he came noiselessly alongside the automobile from the rear, his presence had not been noticed until he asked his rather startling question.

"Don't blab what?" he enquired again, but with a smile.

"Oh, nothing. Where in the world have *you* been, Con?" Phil responded.

"Hot stuff! Sensation that'll make your hair curl; but 'don't blab it,'" answered the reporter, with a grin. The car was running slowly and he held to the mud guard to keep easily abreast of the auto.

"It will be all over town before tomorrow. The bare facts will be common talk, at any rate, so I might as well tell you. Somebody knocked Mike Binski, the huckster, on the head and turned his place upside down. No telling how much they got. Must have happened Sunday, or maybe as long ago as Saturday. His stock hadn't been fed for a long time and his horse, left standing in the wagon, still stood there, nearly dead, though it wasn't even tied. And Binski's probably done for."

"He ought to be," harshly ejaculated Paul, thinking of the unpaid debt. "Maybe he won't say he can't pay his bills, now!"

"Why, you vindictive little wretch, you!"

exclaimed Phil, taken aback by the boy's remark at such a time.

"Yes, Jonesy, better chuck that!" said Dave, who missed few opportunities to scold Paul.

"But who did it? How did they find him? Who——" A perfect volley of questions were coming from the boys, but Cecil had now let go the mud guard, and waving his hand good-bye, rode rapidly forward.

"That ambulance must have been going to Binski's place. Going to take him to the hospital likely," said Billy Worth.

"Wouldn't take him to the theater, I suppose!" answered Dave. A deep fund of sarcasm in MacLester's make-up occasionally revealed itself.

"Cecil said that thing must have happened Sunday or Saturday," Phil spoke up thoughtfully. "And we saw Binski Saturday evening. Why, suppose somebody should get it into his head that it was us who pounced onto him!" he added carelessly.

"Or what if Binski should say it was us, just

to play us dirt?" suggested Billy, equally carelessly. He even laughed.

Odd as it may seem, none of the boys for a moment seriously considered the possibility that suspicion might be attached to them. Their innocence of so much as a thought of doing the huckster injury was, of course, the reason. Neither did they recall to mind the tall man with the slouch hat pulled low over his forehead, whom they had seen in the woodland near Binski's wretched home.

All the way to the little green and yellow shed, now their garage, the friends talked of the assault on the huckster. Even Paul softened toward the fellow and hoped he wasn't likely to die. But for the most part their discussion was regarding the amount the robber might have obtained.

The boys had often heard the rumors and conjectures that Binski was a miser and had large sums concealed about his premises. They were curious to learn just what the assailants had found. Still debating the subject, they

reached the alley and ran the car lightly into its shelter. Then each hurried away to supper. It was late. To have to blame the automobile for tardiness the first day of its ownership would certainly not do at all.

Con Cecil, meantime, had reached the Tribune office. He telephoned to his chief, the city editor, long since gone home, all that he had learned. Then he telephoned the general hospital to inquire about the huckster's condition. He rather expected, maybe he even hoped,—so zealous was he always in pursuit of extraordinary news—to be told the man was dead, at least that he could not live.

However, the information obtained was no more definite than he had had earlier, merely that Binski was unconscious, and quite possibly would die. The man had been dangerously hurt by blows on the head, administered with a club or some similar weapon. Exposure to the rain of the preceding night and to the sun and gnats and flies nearly all of one day,

if not two, had certainly been of no benefit to him.

Cecil knew that the police were busily at work to solve the mystery of the robbery. He called at the Central station to learn what, if anything, more than he already knew, had been discovered. The officers in charge and those who loitered about were talking very earnestly of the crime, but they could shed no new light on the mystery.

The reporter went to supper at a restaurant near by, his mind full of the big news story. Going over all the facts he had discovered in his visit to the scene of the assault out on the unfrequented road, he made out the substance of his information to be: First, that Binski was attacked just as he had driven up to his little barn. Second, that the time must have been Saturday evening, for the huckster would not be driving out in his wagon on Sunday. Third, that robbery was the motive of the assault. Fourth, that so far as could be ascertained the assailant or assailants might have

obtained a large sum, or very little. The huckster's pockets had been turned inside out and his house ransacked from top to bottom.

As he lived entirely alone, the peddler's plight had not been discovered until late Monday, when the nearest neighbor, living a quarter of a mile distant, had been attracted to the place by the incessant squealing of the unfed pigs. This neighbor could furnish no clew to the robbers. He was a rough, uncouth fellow, but apparently an honest, industrious workman.

"With the rain having washed out every trace of tracks that may have been made, and all that, there is mighty little to work on," said the reporter to himself. "That heavy hickory stick I picked up is the only thing. It had been just freshly cut. Except for that it was such a club as might be found around any country farmyard. Who cut it, and where?"

Then of a sudden a new thought came into Cecil's mind. Unconsciously he opened wide his eyes and stared in amazement at the picture his thoughts presented.

"'Don't blab it,'" he whispered to himself. "Can it be possible that that is where the money came from to buy that automobile? By all that's marvelous! and such respectable, really well-behaved young shavers, too! I wonder if the police know more than they've been willing to admit!"

CHAPTER VII

THE STAR LAKE CLUB

There were sounds of hammering and sawing and of enthusiastic young voices very early in the morning in the neighborhood of the green and yellow garage. Some people who, very unreasonably, to be sure, wished to sleep were quite annoyed.

But then, they owned no automobile. There was no necessity for them to be stirring about at five o'clock to put a private garage in good condition. There was no trip to Star Lake in prospect for them, as soon as a certain amount of work was done.

There was this prospect in view, however, for the four young gentlemen responsible for the racket. A carpenter had named eleven dollars as the cost of putting more windows in the green and yellow shed, cutting and hanging

two large doors and making the other alterations desired.

"Here's where we save the price of a gasoline tank then," said Phil Way, and the boys went to work with enthusiasm.

In due time the alterations on the brightly painted shed were practically completed, for the work had been well under way before today. In due time the several odd contracts of the Young American company, which required attention, had received the same. With grace and ease, and no noise save the subdued murmur of the motor, the Thirty headed toward Star Lake. It is probably unnecessary to mention that the passengers were the Auto Boys. Billy was at the wheel, Phil beside him and Paul and Dave in the tonneau.

The trip was an experimental one. The lads desired to know just how long they must expect to take for the run when it was made as a matter of business. To be familiar with the roads at all points was essential, also. Again, there was the desirability of getting as much real

practice with the car as they could do in the short time at their disposal before the beginning of the passenger service enterprise.

In a wonderfully short time, so much had they learned from observation, so much of auto knowledge had they unconsciously absorbed by talking and thinking of motor cars for the last year or more, that the young drivers had at once been able to handle their machine excellently.

True, sharp curves were not negotiated with the same science a veteran would exhibit; bad bumps and holes in the road were not taken with that easy, sidewise approach which they learned in time. But care and a proper watchfulness did much to compensate for whatever lack of skill there may have been in the lads' driving during the period of their early experiences.

Straight north the Thirty purred along. Out of the city over a long stretch of good pavement, then on to the country road. The latter lay for a considerable distance in the partial

shade of a double row of tall elms. The trees were delightful on a warm, sunny day but in damp weather far less so. The roadway dried so much the less quickly.

Just beyond the elms was a rather sharp dip —a dangerous point, for the road crossed the W. E. & N. tracks at the foot of the slope. High banks largely shut off the view in both directions along the railroad. One must listen and go slowly to be safe. Rising gradually from this depression the highroad ran nearly straight through fine, level country for nearly two miles. Then it curved easily around the side of a hill and dropped quite gently into a broad valley. Here, a few rods to the right, as one approached, was the entrance to Star Lake.

The resort was frequented but little by the general public. It lay too far from the trolley lines for this; but with those who owned their own conveyances, whether carriages or automobiles, the Lake was a popular place. By campers, also, the grounds were in demand the entire summer. No where near was the fishing

so good. No where near was there such delightfully clear water, nor so good a bottom of sand and gravel as Star Lake possessed. It was a superb place for bathing and boating.

In size Star Lake was not of much account, perhaps, being less than two miles in length by a mile or so in width all its greatest breadth. But what it lacked in dimensions it fully made up in beauty. On both sides the shores sloped gently back a little distance, then rose abruptly in thickly wooded hillsides.

At the western end was an expanse of cleared land, slowly sloping upward in the distance. Here and there a house was seen, and here and there were orchards and clumps of trees Fat cattle grazed in the green pastures and the grain grew luxuriantly in the cultivated fields.

At the eastern end of the Lake the land lay much the same as at the west, but more level and the country, too, was more or less wooded. A small stream flowed from this part of the lake, circled about and eventually formed a junction with Catfish Creek. It was the Lake's

only outlet. There was no inlet other than numerous springs along the gravelly banks and the little rills trickling down from similar springs along the abrupt hillsides on both the north and south sides.

The drive approaching the Lake was a broad, well-kept gravel road. It passed beneath great oaks and maples, formed a large circle before the great porch of the Brush hotel, then continued on to the very edge of the water. The hotel was a trim, neat building of a rustic style of architecture. Its broad verandas were cool and shady. Vines clambered over its walls in many places. The attractive outward appearance was fully equalled by the pleasant comforts offered within. Indeed, the establishment was unusually complete in every way. While by no means large, and not at all grand, as that word is customarily used, the Brush hotel offered so much to those looking for restful quiet or simply a little outing away from the crowds and the noise, that its patronage was quite all that could be desired.

The ultra-fashionable did not, as a rule, find Star Lake attractive. They pronounced it dull. The holiday crowds were not seen there, partly for the same reason, and, partly, because the Lake was reached by neither the electric nor steam railroads.

The class of passengers the Auto Boys would have to and from the resort should for the most part be the very best. For that matter the Brush hotel people wanted no others there. The management prided itself, indeed, upon the eminent respectability of the establishment. Wealth barred no one but extravagant display was looked upon with suspicion. Also, one might as soon expect to find wolves at large among a flock of sheep, as crooks and card-sharks and their kind at Star Lake.

Some of these things the four friends were discussing while their car sped smoothly on toward the resort. As they turned into the drive another automobile, which had come up behind unobserved, cut a sharp corner and taking an inner track at the curve, passed them and

drew up in front of the hotel with a flourish. Three boys, all in the gayest of summer attire, stepped out and stood watching the approach of the Thirty.

"That's the Westerfield outfit," growled Paul Jones in an undertone.

"*You* keep a civil tongue, now mind, Paul," admonished Phil Way in a low, sober voice. "We'll consider that bunch as being all right till we find out that they're not."

"Sure!" piped Paul, as if he had never had a thought to the contrary, which certainly was not the case.

"Hello! hello! Bless my heart! This looks like business! Here's our jolly Auto Boys, I declare! Shut down your motor and come right up here." The speaker was a portly, gray-haired man of sixty years or more,—sixty years young, not old, he himself always said,— and he lived up to that description. "Here, Andrew Jackson! bring a couple of bottles of ginger ale, right off the ice, now, mind you! Well, well!" he exclaimed again and again.

The portly gentleman, chuckling merrily, drew five chairs to one of the little tables on the shady veranda, as he issued his command to a young colored waiter. As the four boys seated themselves, he sat down with them, his face glowing with pleasure. There probably never was a better natured, or more hale and hearty hotel keeper than he. To everybody who visited the resort he was "Uncle" Joe Brush, and everybody's friend. While he maintained some pretty strict rules about his establishment, and on the grounds around the Lake, yet he was the most sociable, jolly fellow one could well imagine, so long as he was not given cause for being otherwise.

"And so you start the Star Lake Auto service tomorrow! Well, bully for you!" Uncle Joe went on, cordially, as the colored fellow clinked the ice in the glasses. "Arabian Knights was out here yesterday. Told me all about it. Had Judge Sweetly with him in a regular man-eater of a machine."

The boys laughed to hear George Knight

called "Arabian," and Judge Crossley "Sweetly." It was a facetious way with Uncle Joe Brush to indulge in odd fancies of speech, particularly with names. No one was too grand or too dignified to escape. A total stranger registering as Mr. Black was certain to be addressed immediately as Mr. White. Or, suppose he registered as John Adams, he would at once become James Monroe or Mr. Polk or Mr. Jefferson, or the like, in the jolly landlord's jovial, breezy salutations. And so delightfully winning was the young, old man's way it was impossible even for the most serious or solemn of individuals to be offended.

"That is just what we wanted to talk about," put in Phil Way, when Uncle Joe paused. "We understood from Mr. Knight that you,—why, that we could expect a bonus from the hotel, if we kept up the passenger service regularly the whole season."

"Not a word said about any trouble of that kind to me," said the landlord with the greatest apparent seriousness, lighting a cigar.

"Mr. Knight talked to us of arranging with you to pay a hundred dollars for the good the auto service might be to the hotel and the Lake, you know," put in Billy Worth, pretty soberly.

"Yes, that was the agreement, but there weren't any names called. If he did, I didn't hear it," the landlord replied with twinkling eyes. "But what you say is right. Here, Napoleon Bonaparte,"—this to the same waiter addressed as Andrew Jackson a few minutes before—"bring me that sealed envelope you'll find on my desk."

The darky grinned in answer to the amusement he saw in the boys' faces, and quickly performed his errand.

"Here's an advance payment on the first month's service," Uncle Joe continued jovially. "Don't hesitate to ask me for what you don't want, and if we want anything you haven't got, just tell Charlie Ross, here,"—calling the colored fellow by the third different name, all in a space of ten minutes.

Mr. Brush handed the envelope to Phil, told

the boys to make themselves "just as uncomfortable as they liked" and with a merry laugh sauntered over to where two men were unpacking some fishing tackle at the farther end of the long veranda.

Left to themselves, the Auto Boys remained seated at the little table talking. The previous summer they had made two or three fishing trips to Star Lake, becoming well enough acquainted with Mr. Brush to know that, despite his whimsical manner, he was thoroughly to be depended upon. His pleasant greeting, therefore, and voluntary advance payment toward the prospective passenger service, were most encouraging.

Presently the lads went for a stroll down the drive leading to the beach, and along the row of half dozen cottages facing the water. Their extraordinary good fortune in money matters was the subject of their conversation. The finding of a generous contribution in the tin box was still an unsolved mystery, and now a good-

sized check had been handed them for services yet to be rendered.

"Such luck is too good to last," said Dave MacLester with a frown. "How much does Mr. Brush's check call for, Phil?"

The latter opened the envelope, and exhibited the paper. "Twenty-five dollars!" he said.

"We're going to have a lot of passengers, too, I'm sure," said Billy Worth confidently. "See, five of the six cottages are occupied now, and the season's hardly open."

"Just the same, it won't come so easy all the time," Dave persisted in a half-gloomy way.

"Oh, Dave, I'll bet if some one should say to you, 'Here's seven dollars you may have,' you'd growl about taking it because of a hole in your other pants' pocket at home," forcibly exploded Paul Jones.

Billy laughed merrily. Phil smiled, and somehow, Dave himself forgot his pessimistic feeling.

As the boys returned to the hotel they noticed the three youths who had passed them at

the entrance still lounging near the veranda steps. Coming nearer, they saw one of the two shooting pebbles, picked up from the drive, by snapping them with his thumb and finger, in such a way that most of them struck the brightly varnished body of the Thirty. Whether his action was only foolishly careless, or intentionally malicious, they could not judge for he shot but once after seeing that he was observed.

Billy Worth and Paul would have given vent to their indignation at once. Phil urged forbearance, however, and no words were spoken until one of the strangers said, as the four chums stepped up to their own car: "Are you the kids that are going to carry passengers out from town?"

That word "kids" and the speaker's tone didn't have a pleasant sound. Paul Jones was cranking the motor or there would have been a warm reply. As it was, Billy Worth made answer, coolly:

"This is the car that's going to carry them."

"If it don't get ditched or run over by some-

thing with a motor in it," said another of the three, jeeringly. There was something contemptibly mean and insinuating in his tone, and he made a bad matter worse when he quickly added: "Better keep out of *our* way along the road."

"Do tell!" exclaimed Phil Way, with calm sarcasm. Paul laughed aloud as he climbed aboard. It was so novel a thing for Phil to show his temper that it amused him greatly.

"*Uncle's* pants will soon fit Willie," remarked Dave MacLester, with a smile, and just loud enough for all to hear.

This obvious reference to the real owner of the automobile used by the three youths who styled themselves the Star Lake club, did not please any one of them. Perhaps they foolishly supposed that by posing as the owners of the car they made every one believe the machine did belong to them. To be so promptly undeceived by boys of their own age, and at such a time, was nothing if not humiliating.

"Uncle's pants! Huh! Uncle's pants!"

snorted the largest of the three, a heavily built, low-browed fellow. "And there ain't one of us that's named Willie, either!"

The poor chap tried so hard to say something sharp that what he did succeed in saying made him appear very ridiculous indeed.

"Well, well! We thought you were the 'Real thing Willie Boys.' Please excuse us," responded Billy Worth quickly. For answer there came a perfect volley of names, whose very depravity and low coarseness indicated the narrow mental calibre of those who used them.

Phil had started the car, but Paul Jones, bound that he should not fail to have a part in the wordy encounter, called out, kissing his finger tips with mock politeness, "Hate awfully to leave such a fine young bunch, but we have to. Ta, ta!"

The "fine young bunch" (if it may be supposed that by this term Paul meant the Star Lake club, which appears quite probable), called after the rapidly disappearing auto, but its occupants did not again reply.

It mattered little, however. The quarrel was started and a trifle more or a trifle less fuel at this time would neither have checked the blaze nor added materially to it.

The trouble might have been avoided, it is true, by continued forbearance on part of the Auto Boys; but the Star Lake club were three mischief-makers and it is doubtful if the most civil treatment would have won their friendship or improved their conduct.

Pitt Sagger, the low-browed, slow and heavy member of the club, was the eldest. His age was about sixteen, though his position in school was with lads from two to three years younger. Jay and Martin Waldo, the other members of the trio, were aged fifteen and fourteen respectively. All three were cousins.

Jay was usually the leader, and a bright snappy sort of boy he would have been but for his bullying ways and his entire lack of consideration for anyone save himself. It was he who so unpleasantly started the conversation narrated on a preceding page. Martin, also,

had in him the making of a good, lively boy but for his vicious temper and the petty meannesses in which he indulged whenever the opportunity offered. Needless, almost, to say, he it was who had so wilfully snapped the sharp pebbles against the Auto Boys' machine as it stood before the hotel.

"We'll lay for them, all right, won't we, Jay?" said Martin Waldo, venomously, when he saw no heed was given the foul language he called after the car and its four passengers. "Thought themselves all-fired smart because old man Brush took notice of them."

"Lay for them? If that automobile of theirs has either engine or tires left when we get through, they can count themselves lucky," cried the one addressed, in the same spirit.

"Boys!" It was Uncle Joe Brush speaking, and the three members of the Star Lake club turned in surprise, wondering how much of their talk he had heard. "Boys," said Uncle Joe, calmly, but not in his habitually jovial manner, "your Uncle John Sagger I regard as a

high-grade man and a gentleman in every particular; but if he does not tell his nephews that they must conduct themselves as gentlemen, also, around Star Lake and this hotel, at least, I'm afraid I shall have to do it for him. There's an old saying, a word to the wise gathers no moss, or is sufficient, or something of that kind," he concluded more lightly, "and so let's have nothing unpleasant about here for anybody."

"Well, we don't have to associate with a lot of young snobs playing hack-drivers," answered Jay Waldo, grudgingly.

Uncle Joe turned and walked away without replying. A thoughtful frown had taken the place of his usual sunny smile. Maybe if he had not at that moment and for a long time afterward regarded John Sagger quite so highly, he would have turned and said to Mr. Sagger's nephews just what was in his mind to say. His doing so would possibly have prevented trouble all around.

CHAPTER VIII

A BUSY DAY FOR CON CECIL

The mystery surrounding the assault on Michael Binski, the huckster, was much talked about in Lannington. A freshly cut hickory club was the only clue to the robbers which the police had discovered.

Great prominence was given this stick, accordingly. The newspapers contained pictures of it. Every reporter examined and measured it and estimated the weight. The detectives made examinations with microscopes and said no doubt there were traces of blood upon the weapon.

The wounded huckster still lay unconscious in the general hospital. He might die and he might recover. The doctors didn't attempt to say which. In his delirium he muttered, "Go 'way! I don't got no money! Help! Help!" but

never did he mention a name or speak any word which would throw any light on the mystery.

It was very generally believed that Binski's assailants must have made off with a large sum of money. No one could say how much because nobody knew. The estimates of the police and newspapers were guesses and nothing more; yet they agreed that the robbers obtained more than a thousand dollars. A heavy leather pouch was found near the peddler's wagon. It was empty, but any number of people were found who told of having seen just such a money bag in Binski's hands, bulging with gold and silver coins and paper money.

The Auto Boys heard the cries of the early editions of the evening newspapers on the streets when they returned to town from Star Lake. They bought a paper and turned their car into the park. In a quiet, shady spot they stopped to read the account of the assault and robbery. Instantly their quick eyes fell on the headline in large, black type: "Struck Down

With A Heavy Club," and a little beneath it a picture of that weapon.

"Great snakes! That's the very club I cut in the ravine!" cried Paul Jones. "I dropped it there by Binski's fence when you told me to, Phil. Why, you never can tell what's going to happen!"

"Well, I see what might happen, all right, if anyone knew we had been at Binski's last Saturday night!" said Phil, rather soberly, but smiling. "That's the same hickory stick you had, Paul. I remember the ragged way it was cut off at the small end, just as it shows in the picture. Now, then, suppose the police knew we went to Binski's along about dark. Suppose they knew we carried such a regular old shillalah with us, and suppose some one going along the road saw us and heard that crazy old huckster yell the way he did!"

"Huh! I reckon we could prove that it wasn't us! There's four of us to say so. It is not as if there was only one fellow's story for it," Billy made answer. "Still, I s'pose—"

"I s'pose the best thing we can do is keep our mouths shut," Dave interjected, and the supposition Billy had in mind was never stated.

"D. B. I.—Just what I told you before," laughed Paul, not in the least disturbed by what seemed to him too remote a possibility for serious consideration. "Just the same, though, I don't want to be yanked up before any judge or anything," he said.

"Get witness fees," said Billy, with a business like air.

"Fellows, Paul's right, I believe. D. B. I. better be our motto and we better keep it good and fast. At any rate, till we see what happens," said Phil after some reflection.

"I tell you there's going to be trouble come of this thing, I don't care what you do," Dave MacLester argued. "For my part, though, I say we can't keep too busy keeping our mouths shut."

The others agreed. With the exception of Paul, they were impressed by the serious consequences which might arise from the circum-

stantial evidence seeming to connect them with the robbery.

Paul's position was typical of himself. "Just let anybody say we had anything to do with knocking that old duffer over! I'll show 'em!" he said, and shook his fist so close to Dave's nose that the latter cried, as he dodged, "Keep your paws to yourself, will you? They smell like a gasoline factory."

"Oh, that's soap you smell, only you don't know it," Paul retorted with a grin.

The engine had been humming away merrily all this time, for the Auto Boys had yet to learn the strictest economy with their machine. But now Phil released the brake, threw the clutch in gently and turned toward home and dinner. As they passed out of the park they saw Con Cecil, the reporter, hurrying along opposite the entrance. He hailed them, but the lads failed to understand that he desired them to stop, and were half a block distant before he could signal again.

"That's strange! I wonder if they didn't care

to see me?" thought Mr. Cecil as he hurried on. "For I'm very much afraid that the Auto Boys' Express and Transportation Company is going to get more free newspaper space than passengers. Rather nice young shavers, too! I only wish I knew whether the police know what I know. Strange that I haven't run into the detectives anywhere if we're both on the same track."

Since his reflections of the previous evening when the possible significance of the words "Don't blab it," had rushed upon his mind, the aggressive young reporter had been busy. By guarded inquiries here and there he had learned that his four youthful friends spent Saturday afternoon in the country, returning just after dark.

He had discovered that four boys were seen on the main road from town to Binski's place just at twilight the same day.

He had learned that the Auto Boys paid a considerable sum in cash on the purchase price of their car on Monday morning.

He had found out, also, from Sam Carew, whom he met quite by accident, and thoroughly "pumped"—although that young gentleman little suspected it—that Phil Way and his chums had had trouble with the huckster over an account. Further, he found it to be commonly supposed among the boys in the localities where Binski sold his produce, that the peddler had large sums of money at all times. These boys knew, too, that, though rough in appearance and brutal in his actions, the old fellow was really a nervous, excitable coward.

A great deal of information which Sam Carew volunteered, Mr. Cecil appraised at its true value and ignored. This included the boy's statements that he had often told Binski what would happen to him, and that Binski had once exhibited a whole chest full of gold to some man —an uncle of Sam's, living in Chicago—who stopped at his house for a drink. How much more the reporter might have gathered had he lingered with young Carew long enough, would be hard to say. Very likely he could have cap-

tured the robbers, found a great many thousands of dollars in gold concealed in their hat bands, and have seen them safe in jail,—all in Sam's imagination,—had he waited.

But Sam had given the reporter all the information in which the latter placed any reliance long before he stopped talking. So, suggesting to the young gentleman that he "better turn over, for he was sleeping on his back," Mr. Cecil soon closed the interview. Thus far he had verified at every turn the suspicion so suddenly coming into his mind.

Added to all else he had learned was Cecil's personal knowledge that the boys had been out in their new car in the direction of Binski's home on Monday. This, he surmised, was for the purpose of learning whether the assault had been discovered. He had not now the slightest doubt that the words he had overheard that day referred to the robbery.

Cecil told the city editor of the Tribune his suspicions and all that he had gathered to confirm them. That gentleman was delighted; but

he feared to print the story the reporter proposed to write. Also, he was unwilling, as was likewise Mr. Cecil, to tell the police what had been discovered, lest the other papers obtain the news before the Tribune could print it exclusively, and so score a "scoop" or "beat."

"You haven't evidence enough to print what you have found and give the names of the boys," the city editor at last declared. "Neither do I want to use the story without the names. It would simply put the police on the same track we are on. The Tribune would lose the credit for solving the mystery. No, let the cops and other newspapers go ahead on their pet theory that a tramp was the guilty party. We'll tell them and everybody else just how it really did happen and who did it, a little later. So, Con, you get busy. Get more evidence. Get it in time for today's last edition if you can, but get it."

"All four of the boys are Tribune carriers," remarked the reporter.

"I knew that young Way was. I don't know

the others. I know the Way boy's father—pretty good sort of a man. I'm sorry for him."

"I've got something on that Binski case," said another reporter, hastily entering and stepping up to the city editor's desk. "The county has offered five hundred dollars reward for the arrest of the robbers or information that will prove who they were."

"Good!" the chief of the city staff exclaimed. Then as the newcomer hurried to his own desk, he said to Cecil in a low tone: "It's two hundred and fifty apiece for you and me if we do this right."

"We've all but got the money," whispered the reporter confidently. "But the game mustn't be played too fast. I'll get next to those boys as soon as I can, and if I get nothing big before then, I'll be their first passenger to Star Lake when they start that auto service tomorrow morning."

"On the job, then, on the job!" the chief com-

manded briskly, and Cecil vanished from his presence instantly.

The newspaper man spent considerable of the afternoon in ascertaining that the police had found no trace whatever of the huckster's assailant. Indeed, the officers came as near admitting their utter inability to throw any light upon the mystery as they well could without actually making such a confession,—a thing of which they would not be guilty.

Then Cecil haunted the park entrance and other likely places in search of the Auto Boys. He wished to meet them as if by accident. He believed if they did not suspect his knowledge of their guilt, he could, by conversation with them, piece out and complete his chain of evidence. If they were given reason to suspect him, he might fail. Always keen for news in a case of this kind, particularly, and following every elusive bit of information with a zeal which knew no rest, the prospect of sharing in the reward made him more keen, more constant in his de-

sire and more persistent in his efforts than ever.

But Mr. Cornelius Cecil looked for the Auto Boys in vain. The early part of the afternoon they were spending in the completion of work at the little green and yellow garage. When they did take the car out again, they did not go near the park or the down-town district.

First they gave a neighbor's nurse girl and baby a short ride near home. Next came the delivery of some porch boxes for a florist of the vicinity whose small establishment was without a wagon. This netted a dollar for a half hour's work, the first money the Thirty had directly helped to earn.

"It's the last day we shall have the auto entirely to ourselves with no regular work for it to do," said Phil. "Let's run out to Gleason's and—well, we might look in the tin box again just for luck."

"You'll find it full—of nothing," was Dave's comment, but he liked the proposal otherwise and five minutes later the car was

headed toward the road running east from town.

It was not, of course, with the expectation that they might find more cash in their treasure chest that the boys desired again to visit the Ravine. Curiosity and interest in the mystery of the money that had been left for them helped to suggest their going, but merely an objective point was what they really had in mind. Any other place would have served as well had it been suggested.

So are our courses constantly directed by a power unseen and unfelt, however much we think that we, ourselves, are planning them. The consequences of the boys' brief run to Gleason's and the briefer stay proved tremendously important much later, though in no manner looked for at the time.

As the lads passed the fork where the road to Binski's place branched off, they were tempted to drive in that direction and look about the peddler's deserted premises. The thought that they might better not be seen in

the vicinity came to them, however, and they continued on.

A woods bordered the public road for some distance in the vicinity of the Ravine. At a point about opposite the hut on the hillside the car was run to one side of the roadway and stopped.

Paul volunteered to remain with the machine while the other lads ran through the woods, and across the valley to the Retreat. He took the driver's seat, of course, while doing so. For a few minutes after being thus left alone he remained in the car, then climbed down and backed away a few paces to take a long, admiring look at the Thirty's graceful lines and contemplate his good fortune in being one of the owners of such a prize. While thus engaged, he heard another automobile approaching and turned hastily in its direction.

The gray car of the Star Lake club boys was bowling toward him at fair speed. Its occupants had not discovered him, however, nor the

Thirty, as both were concealed by bushes closely bordering the highway.

When within scarcely more than a hundred yards of Paul's place of concealment the gray car stopped. The three boys in it looked about them with apparent anxiety, then drove close to the bush-lined road and blew a sharp, quick blast on the horn.

"Jimminy crickets! What's that for?" ejaculated Paul beneath his breath. At once he began a cautious advance in the direction of the gray machine, keeping himself well concealed by the underbrush. Before he could approach sufficiently near to see what was going on, however, he heard the wheels and engine of the gray auto in motion again. A second or two later the machine glided rapidly past him, and continued on in the direction of the city.

But the Star Lake boys were not the auto's only occupants now. A fourth person, a rather large, slender man and roughly dressed, was with them. He was putting on an auto cap and a long auto duster coat as the car leaped for-

ward on the high gear. In a moment the gray machine was alongside the Thirty, which was discovered by the former's passengers with evident surprise. Their own machine was brought to low speed at once and they looked back at the empty auto in a questioning manner. Being satisfied that no one was near, apparently, they put on all power and were soon far down the road.

Paul was considerably puzzled by what had taken place, but disappointed, too. He had hoped to make a remarkable discovery of some kind. He had no well-defined idea as to what sort of a discovery it might have been, but the notion of a secret cave somewhere near came to his mind. It was a foolish thought, of course; but one cannot always account for the ideas that spring into one's consciousness unbidden. As easily might one seek to account for his dreams.

Soon Phil, Dave and Billy came back from their inspection of the hillside hut. They had found everything quite as they left it. The

double tin box, now empty, had not been removed from its place beneath the rock.

All three boys were quite interested in Paul's account of what had occurred in their absence. They wondered who the strange man might have been, but as Star Lake campers and guests at the Brush hotel often strolled long distances from the resort, the fellow may have been one of them. Little importance was attached to the incident for this reason.

The Gleason farmhouse was not far distant and the Thirty soon wheeled with a flourish into Mr. Gleason's rather rough drive. That gentleman was grinding a scythe beneath a tree close by, but quickly left off to give his guests welcome.

Pleasant and kind, in his way, was Mr. Gleason, but today he complained a great deal about the difficulty of obtaining help for his farm work, and ardently wished it were his good fortune to "go hiking up and down the roads in an automobyle." Incidentally he mentioned that even "Duck" Neely was scarcely to be de-

pended upon any more. The hired man had the automobile fever himself, or something, for he often went to town when he ought to be at work. Also, he was too chipper and too good-natured some of the time and too cranky and too cross the rest of the time.

Mr. Gleason didn't know what caused it, but he had no doubt that "automobyles" were responsible for many evils. The country, he said, was going to the dogs for want of farm help and he would like to hire at least one good hand. Couldn't Phil or Billy or Dave or Paul, or all four, help him out? he inquired.

The boys laughingly said they would see about it, cheered the farmer with their compliments on his thrifty cornfield and splendid garden, and headed homeward.

Smoothly, easily the Thirty glided along. Over the meadows came the scent of the green fields, and flowering trees and shrubs. Perfect contentment was in the hearts of the Auto Boys. The Star Lake passenger service was scheduled to begin in the morning.

CHAPTER IX

ALL ABOARD FOR STAR LAKE

Too bad for the brightly polished lamps and horn and levers; too bad for the clean, bright wheels and other woodwork; too bad for the whole freshly washed and shining car and for the Auto Boys, themselves, Wednesday morning came damp and cool. A fine mist, which was neither rain nor fog, but more like the former, was in the air. Just at daylight there had been a slight rain and the moisture-filled atmosphere gave abundant promise that the storm was not over.

While it had been agreed that Billy Worth should make the first of the regular business trips to the Lake, all four boys gathered at the garage on Dr. Way's back lawn and together they drove to the downtown entrance of the park.

Paul was pretty vigorous in his denunciation of the weather, but his adverse comment did not appear to disperse the clouds to any marked extent nor check the slowly descending mist. Phil and Billy took a more philosophical view of the situation, and only regretted that the car would get wet and muddy. Dave naturally was of the opinion that it would be a wet summer anyway, and that the present storm would last a week. He expressed himself accordingly.

Fifteen minutes in advance of the time scheduled for leaving the park entrance, the Thirty was alongside the curb in readiness and waiting. Sam Carew, Percy Hassett and Fred Perth, the "Grand Syndicate," were there too. They had gathered to see the start of the enterprise and it would be quite the opposite of the truth to say they hoped there would be passengers.

Five minutes passed. Paul was anxiously watching the town clock. Dave MacLester assured Phil, whom he took to the rear of the car for that purpose, that there wouldn't be a soul going to Star Lake on such a day, but he

wouldn't mind it, if Carew and his gang were not standing by watching for failure.

Billy Worth had been in the "office" at the drug store. "They've sold a bunch of tickets already," he spoke up, taking care that Sam heard him, as he came hurrying back. But he told Phil and the others in an undertone that the size of the "bunch" of pasteboards was limited to two. As these might be used any time, their sale was still no certain indication of business for the first trip.

Another five minutes passed. Not a passenger had appeared. The prospect was decidedly blue.

"Don't see where you're going to put 'em all," remarked young Mr. Hassett with extraordinary relish; but neither officials nor operatives of the transportation company deigned to answer.

"There's three of us that will make good ballast if you *should* have to have it," grinned Freddy Perth, really hoping his suggestion might be accepted.

"Oh, there'll be no room for ballast with all these people falling over themselves to pay out a dollar apiece," said Percy, in much louder tones than the occasion required. He laughed heartily at his attempted joke and Sam and Fred joined in. It was a trying moment for the Auto Boys. Still, they kept their tempers—and furtively watched the clock.

"Can't blame people for not wanting to risk getting themselves killed. Why, I drove a sixty horse-power racer when I was at Atlantic City last summer and—"

"Oh, you drove nothing! You couldn't drive a lame duck up a back alley!" ejaculated Paul Jones, unable to bear the irritation longer. "Go tell it to the babies in the park, but don't spin your yarns to us. Enough to make a man sick!" he concluded with disgust.

Sam made a jeering reply but no one save Fred and Percy gave him further attention.

"Take the wheel, Billy. I'll crank up for you. She leaves on the dot, and those that miss her will learn to be on time," said Phil Way,

briskly springing down from the driver's seat. There was chagrin and disappointment in his heart but none in his voice.

It lacked two minutes of the appointed time. The scoffing "Grand Syndicate," two or three urchins and the Auto Boys themselves were the only persons in view who seemed to know that an automobile transit service was about to be inaugurated. It would have not been so bad if just one person had so much as inquired the price, the time of leaving or shown some interest in the enterprise in some way. The mist was clearing in the air but it still hung heavy indeed upon the spirits of the four friends.

Billy shifted from the left to the right front seat and placed a hand with studied carelessness upon the wheel. It lacked but a minute of seven-thirty by the clock in the Auditorium tower. In despair Phil cast one anxious look quickly in all directions. It was useless. Gritting his teeth, he started the engine. The car responded with throbs of life and vibrations

telling instant readiness to start and anxiously Billy eyed the clock.

"Hope the Brush hotel will have room for everybody," scoffed Percy Hassett.

"Going to make two trips a day, too," laughed Sam, maliciously.

"You keep quiet," said Phil to Paul in a low tone as he saw that young gentleman about to make a warm retort. "On the stroke of the half hour we'll jump in and go along to the Lake. Those fellows are only jealous, that's all. Don't mind 'em."

"A push cart would have carried all the passengers they'll have; and lots cheaper," Percy snickered loudly; but the next instant breath was almost knocked out of him by a red-faced man in a long rain-coat, who ran violently against him, without seeming to realize, in his haste, that he had done so.

"Star Lake Auto?" asked the red-faced man, out of breath, himself.

"Just leaving, sir," answered Phil briskly and threw open the tonneau door.

"It's all right! Hurry along!" cried the stranger, turning to three others who were getting some fishing paraphernalia off a street car that had just stopped close by. Then to Phil he said hurriedly: "Can you take us all? Was afraid we'd miss it. Four round trips."

"Yes, some other people had tickets but they haven't shown up. Pay the driver," was the answer, as the red-faced man held out a five-dollar note.

Billy was prepared to make change and handed back a dollar with a business-like air, just as a single stroke of the Auditorium clock marked the half hour. In a moment three of the four men, all of whom were dressed for fishing, had taken seats in the tonneau and the fourth in front. Then Billy turned the Thirty out from the curb and sped smoothly away.

Somehow the Grand Syndicate's members were less joyful now than they had been a minute before. Somehow they seemed to remember an engagement elsewhere. It must have been

an unpleasant one, too, for they went away very dejectedly.

What a contrast was Paul's gladness! "Only to hear him, though! 'Star Lake auto?' And Phil says 'Just leaving, sir!' and he says 'four round trips,' and flashes a five! Hurrah for us! This is what I call doing business!"

Phil was just as pleased in his own less demonstrative way and Dave equally so, as they watched the Thirty out of sight. Still the latter could not refrain from sighing: "Now if Bill gets through without skidding into the ditch, or something!"

His remark went unanswered. Coming quickly from across the street, Con Cecil, the Tribune reporter, exclaimed at that moment: "Hello, here! The new transportation company must have forgot to fix things up with the weather man."

Now the facts were that the sharp-eyed Mr. Cecil had for ten minutes been watching the Thirty and its owners from a stairway opposite. He had realized, some time after his talk

with the city editor that, if any passengers for the Lake appeared, perhaps not more than one of the boys would make the trip. He had no notion of attempting to get them to talk of the subject uppermost in his own mind in the presence of strangers, in any event. He was prepared, however, to make a run for the car at the last moment, if the lads had started off by themselves. If the car had other passengers, he would try his inquisitive powers on the boys who remained behind, he had decided. This program he proceeded to carry into effect.

"Loaded down the first time out," Mr. Cecil went on, cheerily, without waiting for an answer to his first remark. "Looks as if you boys were filling a long-felt want. I'll make a little notice about it for today's paper. Help push the thing along."

The boys joined in thanking Mr. Cecil for his interest and kindness.

"Don't mention it," he told them, and added, "Come along and have a soda or something on me. I'm dry as a fish."

Needless to say, this invitation was accepted. Instead of leading the way to the nearest soda water establishment, however, Mr. Cecil conducted the boys to a more secluded place where they all seated themselves at a little table in the rear part of the store. "I like to get away from the rush when I can," he explained, "but *don't blab it;* I'm supposed to be at work."

As the reporter spoke these words, he keenly noted their effect on the faces of his young friends. Phil flushed slightly, for the familiar phrase of secrecy caught his quick attention at once. Paul and Dave did not notice it.

The soda water was ordered and Mr. Cecil talked about a number of things while it was being served. Gradually he led up to the subject of the robbery of the huckster. "Rather odd that the grass wasn't tramped down at all where poor old Binski was keeled over," he said casually.

"Why, there was no grass there! It was on the cinders right in front of the barn," Dave MacLester answered.

The reporter's heart bounded with delight but the calm, disinterested expression upon his face changed not a particle.

"Well, it may be. I didn't get there until after he was found, of course," he went on. "What side of the wagon he was on when they jumped onto him, I don't know, but the barn door was open and the robbers had likely been hiding inside."

Now, Mr. Cecil knew very well that the barn door was closed and locked; that it had been found so. But he paused in his remarks and his comment, hoping to be corrected just as he had been when, purposely, he indicated that there was grass where the huckster fell. Nor was he disappointed.

"No, I don't think the barn door was open," said Paul. "I'm pretty sure it was locked. Maybe they were hiding in the corn-crib. That door was open, anyhow."

"No, it was shut. I noticed it particularly," Mr. Cecil answered, as if it really mattered not at all, and that he merely wished to say what he

had seen. Though little he showed it, he was intensely interested. It was his honest conviction that the assailants of Michael Binski—three of them, at least—sat before him. If he could only trap them into admissions that would prove it! "Yes, I'm sure the corn-crib door was shut," he added, reflectively, when no response came to his first contradiction of Paul's statement.

"Well, it wasn't shut on Saturday night," Paul retorted. Instantly he realized he had said too much. This did not, however, save him from Phil's frown, which, though it came and went in an instant, the reporter did not fail to see. Its significance he estimated as almost equal to a confession. Anxious as he was to ask how Paul knew this, he did not do so for fear of showing that he was "pumping" them.

But by this time the ice-cream soda glasses were empty and Mr. Cecil pleasantly insisted on treating again. He was still "dry as a fish," he said and "never did like to sit down alone."

But Phil declared he must be going, and Dave and Paul also arose.

"Wait, I have a curiosity to show you," said Mr. Cecil, with an appearance of lazy indifference. From beneath his coat, which he had kept buttoned, he took a short hickory stick about two feet in length and an inch or more in thickness. It looked as if it had come from some one's woodshed,—as indeed it had.

"There's the club that hit Binski," he said. "I got it from the police to have a picture made for the Tribune."

"Sure it is?" asked Dave. "I don't believe it. Why, the stick had just been cut that day, and this one's old and dry. That is,—that is, of course, unless the police have found another club besides that one that was pictured in the paper," he added with confusion.

The boy's face was red and it is not to be wondered that Mr. Cecil inwardly chuckled over the success of his trick. Well he knew that the hickory he exhibited was not the club that struck Binski. And well he marked Dave's

knowledge that the real weapon was freshly cut. One or two more such outbursts was all he wanted. He dared not, however, go too far lest he frighten the prey and it escape before he was fully prepared to close in upon the lads.

"Come on, Dave, we've a lot to do," called Phil Way, who with Paul had stepped toward the door, after a brief survey of the stick shown them.

The newspaper man joined the boys on the pavement. He made no further reference to the Binski case, but as he walked up the street with them remarked: "I'm going to give your auto service a lot of free advertising." He smiled inwardly, as he thought what kind of advertising. It was a smile which, had it been visible upon his face, would have been hideous.

And yet Cecil was a warm-hearted, kind, conscientious and eminently respectable young man. News was all in all to him—his food and drink, his ambition, his hope for success, and all its rewards in praise and advancement.

The news he *thought* was just within his grasp

was most highly important. His elation was in proportion. When by chance the thought of the boys' plight came to him he was truly sorry that the four bright, young fellows had committed the crime of which, he was convinced, they would speedily be found guilty. But that was their lookout, after all. Since they *had* committed the robbery, as seemed to him so certainly true, he was mightily pleased with himself that he had succeeded in discovering the fact.

"About how much will you have to make to get back your investment in the automobile, anyway?" the reporter went on in a kindly, reflective manner. "How you boys ever raised the price of a big machine like that beats me, with Binski himself and others too, I suppose, trying to beat you out of your accounts!"

"Say, Cecil, what are you driving at, anyhow?" demanded Phil Way abruptly.

"Why, Phil, what's the matter with you all of a sudden? I know all about you fellows having trouble with the old peddler over some money he owed you," the reporter answered

quickly. "But it's none of my business what you paid for the car, if that's what you're flying up about."

"Nor where we got the money," put in Paul Jones warmly, speaking as he often did, with much more of force than wisdom.

"No, nor where you got the money," Cecil assented quietly. "No one doubts you came honestly by it."

To the reader it will be plain that Paul Jones had in mind, in speaking as he did, the money found in the little treasure chest in the woods. The reporter-detective, of course, knew nothing about this. He was thinking, naturally, of the money stolen from the wounded huckster. The result was that if Paul had said in so many words, "We are the ones who struck Binski down and robbed him," he could not have made it appear more clear to Mr. Cecil that such was the case, than he did by the simple language he had used.

"Speaking out plain, I was beginning to think maybe *you* doubted it," Phil replied to the re-

porter's last remark. He was a little ashamed of the outburst which had escaped him, but still spoke in a rather disgruntled manner.

"Oh, forget it," said Mr. Cecil breezily, but he observed what he thought was a decided uneasiness in his young friend's voice and actions. To him this meant much, but recalling his talk with the city editor, and his determination to go slowly and surely, he concluded not to press his inquiries further just then.

At the corner the reporter said good-bye to the lads. Noting their bearing carefully, he concluded that they were glad to be away from him, and chuckled in a way that boded the Auto Boys no good.

"I've got to hold back for another day; but by tomorrow I can tell the police who the robbers were and a sweat-box confession will show that I'm right. Now, I'll get a hold of young Billy Worth by himself, somewhere. Fine! Oh, fine! I guess there won't be any three or four column heads over that story, or nothing! It's the biggest beat in an age!"

Thinking in these lines and planning how he should go about obtaining the admissions he hoped to get from Billy, Cecil strolled leisurely toward the Tribune office. He noticed a card in a bookstore window and stopped to read it, for the heading was "Star Lake Auto Service."

From top to bottom the reporter twice read the announcement. A vision of the faithfulness of the four boys as Tribune carriers, always on hand, always jolly, always well behaved, came to him. Then he thought of their delight over the new automobile and in their passenger service undertaking.

"By George!" he said half aloud, "I wish it had been somebody else. I hate to see it and I wish it wasn't so. Even if Binski gets well, it's a bad, bad business, and—Why, if I didn't know it as well as if I had seen it with my own eyes, I could never believe they did it; but you can't tell a jury that. Blame me if I'm not most sorry I ever found the youngsters out."

With quickened steps Cecil turned toward the Tribune office. He saw a number of people

about the bulletin board outside as he approached, and hastened up to learn what news attracted them. The bulletin read: "Michael Binski sinks fast—will die without regaining consciousness."

Over the unsuspecting Auto Boys the clouds of trouble are hanging low and heavy. Con Cecil sees them, sees the storm now all but breaking, sees its terrible consequences, and turns quickly back the way he came.

CHAPTER X

CROOKED WORK AT STAR LAKE

Without mishap Billy Worth reached Star Lake with his four passengers. He was rather pleased than otherwise to see the Star Lake club trio on the hotel veranda as he ran down the drive at a brisk clip and brought the Thirty smoothly to a halt at the steps.

There were other guests on the veranda this damp morning, also. A number of them called out in greeting, acknowledging the first regular trip of the Auto Boys' car, as some called it, or the Star Lake Auto, as others said.

Uncle Joe Brush shook hands with the red-faced man and the other three fishermen just arrived, as if they were old friends. He called out to "David Crockett,"—who, upon his arrival, turned out to be "Andrew Jackson," alias "Napoleon Bonaparte," etc.—to help the new-

comers with their rods and lines, then turned his attention to Billy.

There could be no doubt that Uncle Joe was immensely pleased with the prospect of an increased business at the hotel. He smiled and smiled as he surveyed the Thirty while shaking hands with the young driver. "I'm so glad you had a wet morning to start the game off," he said. "Fine as can be! Was afraid it was going to be a nice day. We've reserved a space under that open shed yonder where you can hitch while waiting for time to start back, but when it rains you can leave the car on the lawn if you'd rather."

Billy accepted the invitation to use the shed's shelter and ran under cover before stopping the motor. It was not raining, but the sky was still overcast and there would be some time to wait before returning to the city. He brought fresh water from the well at the barns for the radiator, looked over nuts and bearings and saw to it that all was ship-shape excepting, perhaps, for the mud with which the guards and wheels

were well spattered. The car would need a complete washing before looking its best again.

As he was thus engaged, Billy heard Uncle Joe call from the veranda for "Robinson Crusoe." The young colored fellow answered the summons and received instructions, evidently, for he quickly disappeared again. Two minutes later the much-named waiter stepped into the shed where the car was still undergoing its driver's inspection. He brought with him a sparkling glass of root beer and a dainty bread and ham sandwich on a small plate and covered with a snowy napkin.

Billy's pleasure in this tempting offering was more in the spirit which prompted Uncle Joe to send it than in the refreshment itself, but he thanked the bearer and sent his gratitude to Mr. Brush also. The bright-eyed, smiling darkey lingered a little while, however, and Worth improved the opportunity to inquire if he did not have, perhaps, a few more names than he could conveniently remember.

" 'Deed Ah has, sah!" was the laughing

answer. "Ah nevah knows what Ah's gwine to be called nex'. Ah's b'en called Jeff'son Davis, sah, an' Ah's b'en called Hor'ce Greely. Ah jes don' see how Mistah Bresh evah t'inks of all dem names he uses. Maybe dis time Ah'll be Miles Standish, an' de berry nex' minnit Ah'll heah Mistah Bresh callin' out, 'Buffalo Bill!' an' dat's me. Ebery time it's me. Ah s'pects if he'd say, 'Heah, you, Dan Patch', Ah'd go a-pacin."

Billy laughed at the good-natured manner of Uncle Joe's general factotum and felt pleased to have the confidence and good-will of the one of many names. He found this friendly feeling of the colored fellow very valuable at a later date. Just now, however, the waiter did not tarry longer. One call from Uncle Joe for "John Halifax" took him away at a run, although the chances are that he never heard that name before.

Billy hoped that he would have no occasion to come within speaking distance of Pitt Sagger and his none too agreeable cousins but it was

not to be avoided. As he went into the hotel to inquire of the clerk concerning passengers for the city, he met Jay Waldo, the leader of the trio, face to face. Billy would have passed on without a glance at the unpleasant fellow, but the latter did not permit it.

"You want to go a little slower next time you bang your old machine up to this hotel, kid," he said gruffly. "Joe Brush may make a fuss over you dubs and let you think you're 'it,' but we've got some rights that you'd better look out for."

Now the wise thing for Mr. William Worth to have done would have been to ignore this willful trouble-seeker and his offensive language entirely. He knew that well enough, but he feared the young bully would get the idea that he, Billy, was afraid of him. He remembered the hostilities of the day before, also, and quickly made up his mind to settle the trouble one way or another at once.

"Now look here," he said coolly, "your gang don't like our style, and we don't like yours any better. The best thing you can do is not to

speak till you're spoken to. I'm willing to suppose that somebody's paying your board-bill at this hotel and that Mr. Brush is willing you should be here or he'd have thrown you out long ago. So on his account I'd rather not—"

"You bet your sweet life you'd rather not," quickly interrupted Jay Waldo sneeringly. "And what's more you can't hide behind Joe Brush and expect that to save you. What do I care for a country hotelkeeper? Just the least bit more of your lip and I'll—"

"Yes, you'll blow yourself to death some day," retorted Billy, and went on into the hotel, leaving Waldo still sputtering.

Two gentlemen were preparing to go to the city, the young man at the desk told Billy. They would be down directly, he said. Uncle Joe's clerk was a dapper, well-fed fellow of perhaps twenty-five years. He felt the excessive dignity of his position to a remarkable degree, however, and having imparted the information required of him, took no further notice of the lad in the motor cap.

Billy returned to the shed to bring the Thirty to the door. He was just the least bit nervous over having to start the car alone and wanted plenty of time. He saw to it that the levers were placed as they should be, switched on the magneto, properly retarded the spark, and stepped around to the crank.

Thinking to look the car over just a little further, however, he very soon made the discovery that the water of the cooling system had been drained off. Except for his certain knowledge that he had refilled the radiator, he might have believed that, through some sad oversight the pet-cocks had been left open, as he now found them to be; but under the circumstances he was at once certain that the car had been tampered with.

Billy's conviction was certainly not a pleasant one. If the auto had been meddled with in one way, might its proper working not have been interfered with in others? So strongly did this thought impress the young driver that he examined every accessible part of the car.

It but made him realize the more, however, that Mr. Wilder's caution not to "tinker" had been very wholesome advice. He had thought he already knew the car's mechanism pretty thoroughly. Now he would have hated to admit how very ignorant he felt himself to be.

However, after refilling the radiator, Billy assured himself, by cranking the motor, testing the throttle and slowly backing out of the shed, that the car was still in running order. The two gentlemen who were to accompany him were in waiting and as he ran neatly up to the hotel steps, his confidence was quite restored.

Uncle Joe Brush came out to say good-bye to his guests. This fact, no doubt, saved another wordy encounter with the three cousins, for the latter were watching the Thirty from the windows of their room on the second floor. Billy saw them. One glance at their insolent, exulting faces told him that which he already knew, and he had no need to ask who drained the water from the car.

"Now be careful when you go over the W.

E. & N. tracks, son," cautioned Uncle Joe. "Mr. Daw's the superintendent of that road and a good friend of ours. He'd be real provoked if you knocked one of his engines off the rails."

The youthful driver smiled and nodded.

"Ready when you are, Mr. Chauffeur," said one of the passengers, and away the car went.

If any serious injury had been done the Thirty by the jealous cousins, it was not apparent, and probably none had been done—as yet. The machine ran exceedingly well and even on the grade leading up from the entrance to the Lake, purred along as smoothly as could be.

The two passengers both complimented Billy on his driving. If they had known, however, how intently his thoughts were centered on the correct use of the gears, pedals, levers, brakes, clutch, spark and all the manifold things he felt he must keep in mind, they might have known that he had not been operating a car for long. As it was, they never guessed it.

Paul Jones was at the park entrance to meet

the car and ride to the little garage when the passengers had alighted. His rage was tremendous when he learned of the draining of the radiator. He was willing, he said, to meet the whole "Westerfield outfit" single-handed. He would undoubtedly have done it, too, had the opportunity offered; but time was shaping a different course of action for Paul and for his friends as well as for the Star Lake club.

Phil and Dave, after leaving Con Cecil, spent the morning in some work for Daniel Dilworth, the lawyer, who retained their services for many odd jobs, as well as certain daily chores. This forenoon they were putting fresh nails in all the loose pickets on Mr. Dilworth's garden fence. It was nearly noon when they had finished.

Going to the well beneath the grape arbor at the back of the house for a drink of water, they met Mr. Dilworth bent on the same errand. He was a large, stout man with very white hair and a ruddy face whose good, healthy color was in no wise concealed by beard or mustache. Just

now he was polishing his forehead and cheeks to a still brighter glow with an unusually large handkerchief. He had walked home from his office for lunch, apparently. At any rate, he was warm and weary.

Mr. Dilworth allowed the boys to draw a bucket of water with the good, old-fashioned windlass with which his well was equipped, while he seated himself on a bench and continued a vigorous use of the big handkerchief.

Somehow, as he sat there, he impressed the boys, as he had often done before, as just the sort of a man whose well would have a windlass and bucket instead of a pump. He was decidedly old-fashioned. He gloried in it. He disliked haste. As a lawyer he was a good one but he was deliberate. He moved slowly, but when he did move he pushed all before him. Though his heart was in the right place, his manner was gruff, and none of the boys ever felt entirely at ease in his presence. Just now he quite startled Phil and Dave by saying suddenly,

after drinking one brimming cup of water and passing it back for more:

"There are three boys of about your ages at the hotel at Star Lake. You've been out there in that automobile and you've seen them."

"Yes, sir," said Phil.

"Let them alone. Have nothing to do with them. No, don't ask me why. I see the question as plainly as if you had put it in words, and my answer is, don't ask. I wouldn't mention, either, that I told you this. In short, say nothing."

"They don't look good to us, anyway," Dave ventured.

"They what?" said Mr. Dilworth. He fairly growled it.

"I mean we aren't likely to have anything to do with them. We don't like them. They're from Westerfield."

"Well, that's much better," said the lawyer more pleasantly. "But I didn't ask you where they were from. It is quite possible, perhaps I have no need to do so, but that is not the

issue. I've asked you to have nothing to do with those boys. The presumption is that I have your interests in mind, as employes of mine, and as my neighbors; also, that I have a sufficient reason for doing this. The question is then, Will you do it?"

"Yes, sir, we will," answered both Phil and Dave, considerably mystified.

"Those palings all nailed tight?" asked Mr. Dilworth, as if he had mentioned no other subject whatever.

"Every last one," Dave answered.

Without a word the gruff old fellow handed a dollar to Phil. It was the price named in advance for the work.

"Fine feathers don't always make fine birds. Think of that sometimes,' said Mr. Dilworth, and, rising, entered the back door of his dwelling.

Whether this remark had reference to the possibility that they might spend their money for gay clothing, the boys could not decide. Dave thought so as they wondered about it

on the way to the garage beneath the elms. Phil believed the old gentleman had the Star Lake club still in mind and was thinking of his admonition, "Let them alone."

One thing was certain: Daniel Dilworth was little given to idle discourse. There must be some good reason for his suggestion or he would not have made it.

"And I suppose," said Phil, "that no one in Lannington knows more of what is going on,—that is, the things that people generally never hear about, than old Dan Dilworth. I only wish we knew why he wants us to steer clear of that Cousin club at the Lake. Their fine feathers don't make fine birds of them, though. We know that."

What with Billy's little collision with Jay Waldo, the draining of the radiator, and Mr. Dilworth's warning suggestion to Phil and Dave, the Auto Boys found the Star Lake club an almost endless subject of discussion when they all met once more.

Concerning Billy's adventure, a decision was

quickly reached that in future whoever made the trip to the Lake must stay near the car while waiting the time of returning. In this way trouble would be avoided. The kindness of Uncle Joe Brush made it especially desirable that nothing should happen which might annoy him, and it was resolved that no complaint be carried to him, come what might.

That the reason for the hostility of the Star Lake trio was jealousy over the attentions Mr. Brush had shown the Thirty and its owners, the latter were positive. Very likely they would forget it all when the arrival and departure of the car had become an old story. Meanwhile, the lawyer's "Let them alone," was chosen as the watch-word.

But it happens that we all fail at one time or another to do the things we set out to do. The best of plans will fail. The best of resolutions may have to be broken to save more important things. One might resolve to have nothing to do with strange dogs, but force of circumstances could still compel him otherwise.

CHAPTER XI

CON CECIL'S PROBLEM

As the four boys sat talking in their car in the green and yellow shed, Dr. Way and Mr. Worth entered. The two had met by chance and now improved the opportunity to learn how the Thirty and its owners were progressing.

Instantly the lads left off their really serious discussion of the morning's developments, to join in the general admiration of the car's good qualities; nor did they return to the subjects troubling their minds while the two men remained.

It was not a desire to be secretive, nor particularly to keep their difficulties to themselves, that prompted this course. Mainly it was because the four of them were all much occupied, and had so much that was pleasant to tell their elders, that their proper guardians still knew

nothing of the trouble with the Star Lake club or the quarrel with Binski.

Regarding the money so unexpectedly found in the Ravine there was, as has been seen, intentional secrecy. But this was not true regarding the other occurrences destined to loom large in the summer's experiences. Just why the boys continued to avoid mentioning the mysterious note and strange addition to the funds in the treasure box, they themselves might have found hard to explain.

They often wondered and speculated at much length concerning the identity of the writer of the note. It was always an interesting puzzle to try to make out how their hidden money had been discovered; to try to decipher why only part of it had been taken; to guess how it chanced that this portion, together with generous interest, had been so quickly returned.

In a sense the boys felt duty bound to respect the request, "Don't blab it;" but even this they understood to mean merely that they should not spread the discovery broadcast. It did not bar

them from telling those nearest them. Still, to have done so might have set many inquiries afoot, and for the present, at least, the whole matter was kept secret

Not once did it occur to the Auto Boys that there might be a close connection between the strange return of their money, and the robbery of Binski. Even if the thought had been suggested, it would not have been long considered. How could it be? Was it to be supposed that a person honest enough to return money which no one knew he had taken, and also voluntarily pay a fancy price for the use of it, would be bad enough to all but kill the defenseless huckster?

All in all, the secret of the money in the Ravine was a truly enjoyable one. Its element of romance fitted in with the whole history of the Forest Rangers. It seemed like a good dream come true. No thought of serious harm to anyone was ever attached to it.

In the Binski case, while the boys were considerably interested, they did not feel that it particularly concerned them. Their early

anxiety lest their visit to the peddler's place become known, and they be called as possible witnesses, had largely disappeared. They were chiefly curious on the subject of the probable sum obtained by the robbers. If the huckster recovered, as sincerely they hoped he might, he would be able to answer this question. He would be able, also, perhaps, to say who his assailants were. For, somehow, nearly everyone agreed that there had been more than one.

On the whole, then, the likelihood of trouble with the Star Lake club was the only subject really disturbing the Auto Boys at this time. The afternoon trip to the resort had fallen to Dave MacLester, who resented the suggestion that one of the other partners should accompany him. There was, he said, no probability that the three cousins would attempt any of their antics if they were watched closely.

Mr. Dilworth's advice that the trio be let alone did not mean that they should be allowed to tamper with the Thirty, surely. Moreover, if both front seats were occupied by the boys

themselves, not more than three passengers could be carried, Dave argued, and he won his point.

After dinner all four boys went for a short ride, then drove to the park entrance to meet passengers for the Lake. The two gentlemen who had come in with Billy were there ready to return. Another gentleman and two ladies also arrived with round trip tickets, purchased in the drug store, before the time for starting.

"Sorry, but we can't take but two more," spoke Dave from the wheel; but the two men who had come down in the morning insisted that they would not be crowded with four in the tonneau, so the Thirty left on time with a full load. The "Syndicate" was not present to see the start of the second trip, much to the regret of Paul Jones. However, he said he meant to let that "fine young bunch know that they still had the push-cart business all to themselves."

Was it a coincidence that as Phil, Billy and Paul turned away, after seeing the car started, they met Con Cecil just as had happened in the

morning? They may have thought so. Indeed, Mr. Cecil was at some pains to remark that it *was* a coincidence, notwithstanding that he had again been watching from the stairway opposite. But he approached the boys in quite a different way this time. His jovial, easy manner was missing. He was very serious and seemed even sad.

"I s'pose you know that Binski's very low," he said, watching the three faces very closely.

"No, we hadn't heard it," said Phil, quietly, yet interestedly. But Paul exclaimed:

"Well, he'll never tell who hit him, then," and Cecil, looking at him closely saw — or thought he saw—in his expression a gleam of gladness.

"No," replied the reporter, soberly, "it may be he'll never tell. It may be the police will never know. One thing I *would* like to know, though, is how much money was taken. Some say it was a big lot, but I don't think it was."

"I guess you're right at that," was Billy Worth's remark. "You can't tell whether they

found all that Binski had. Even those that got it don't know for sure. How can they?" But feeling that he was getting on dangerous ground, the lad added with just the least confusion: "It's none of *our* business, though."

Cecil looked at the speaker with an almost anxious show of interest. What he was thinking was: "For cool nerve I don't think there has ever been an equal to this." What he said was: "Perhaps not. Still some must make it their business to find out who the robbers were, —the newspapers, the police and authorities generally. But," he went on seriously, "money obtained in that way can never do those who get it any good—can never give any real pleasure, and will only lead to unhappiness, misery and disgrace for those who get it, as well as for their families and their friends. Even if those who robbed Binski are never found out, they will be caught the next time, if there ever is a next time, just as sure as fate. They may think not, but they will. It always ends that way."

As the reporter lighted his short stemmed pipe his hand trembled noticeably.

"You've been thinking too much of that robbery, Con," said Phil.

"I've been working on the case pretty hard," the newspaper man answered, raising his eyebrows and nodding in a significant way.

"What's the good of talking about it then?" said Billy, rather brusquely. "Come on, fellows, I've got some work to do."

"Yes, we all have. So long," said Phil and the reporter answered:

"Good-bye, boys. Take good care of yourselves and if—if anything rather unexpected happens, whatever it might be, keep your mouths shut. It's a good old rule that we're more often sorry for having spoken than for having held our tongues. Don't forget it."

"You bet," was the answer from Paul, and all three boys turned toward the green and yellow garage. They wished to try their hands at patching a badly damaged tire tube, which Mr. Knight had given them to do with whatever

they could. It might come in very handy some day if they could mend and have it in readiness. The size was just right for the Thirty's rear wheels.

Con Cecil walked down the street toward the Tribune office mechanically. His mind was too occupied to take note of the people passing and he started as if from sleep when suddenly he heard his name spoken.

"Confound you, Con, a man could run over you and you'd never see him!" The speaker was Jim Wells, a fellow reporter on the Tribune.

"Well, what's on *your* mind?" demanded Cecil, a little crossly. "I can't say that I was looking for you."

"Well, I was looking for *you* though. Abels wants you and wants you quick. The county has increased the reward in the Binski case and he's been looking for you ever since he heard of it. Must be you expect to pull down the money."

Mr. Abels was the city editor of the Tribune,

and Mr. Cecil was not surprised that he had sent for him. They had had no conversation regarding the robbery and the reward since the day before. The reporter had purposely avoided the subject and his chief as well.

"On my way in now," Mr. Cecil answered to the summons Mr. Wells delivered, however, and hastened off. But at the first side street he turned. He knew not what to do. He could not face his chief just yet.

In his own mind the young reporter was satisfied that he held in his hands the fate of four boys who had, up to one recent hour of temptation, lived good, honest, moral lives. He thought of them and he thought of their fathers and their mothers. All four families he knew by name, as among the good substantial people of the city. And now, as if to convince Mr. Cecil more firmly than ever that he knew the assailants and robbers of the huckster, an odd incident occurred.

Out of a barber shop stepped Mr. Knight, of

Knight & Wilder. "Hello, Cecil," said he, "look here a second. Just a word."

The reporter paused. Mr. Knight he had met and come to know very well at the spring automobile races. "A half hour, if you like," he answered rather gloomily.

"Oh, it's nothing of any consequence," said the other cheerily, but dropping his voice to an undertone, added, "mere curiosity. I saw you talking with the boys I sold a car to, the other day, as if you knew them pretty well. Just for my own information I wish you'd find out where they got their money. Some of it was in gold so tarnished it looked as if it had been buried. I declare I'd think they might have got that huckster's pile if they were that kind."

"Was it all that way—all the money tarnished?" asked the reporter with seeming indifference.

"No. Just a few odd gold pieces."

"Likely it was just some that they had hidden somewhere," the newspaper man answered, little thinking how true his suggestion was. "Fact

is, though, I was curious myself as to where the young shavers got hold of money for an automobile. Thought there might be a story in it and was around to your place to see you. But you don't seem to belong in your garage; at least you are never there."

So did Mr. Cecil seek to cover up the real motive of his interest in the Auto Boys' money; but his heart was thumping tremendously as he realized that the last link in his chain of evidence seemed now to be in his possession. There could be no doubting where that tarnished gold was obtained.

"Busy season," said Mr. Knight, referring to his absence when the reporter called. "Keeps me on the high gear, I tell you. But about the boys,—don't give it a second thought. They're fine youngsters and you ought to boost their Star Lake auto line all you can. I saw the first nice send-off you gave 'em. Very good of you. If you do find out anything about their financial methods, though, let me know. I'm still the

least bit interested in their car; but that's between ourselves, of course."

"Sure," said Mr. Cecil, and presently continued on, while Mr. Knight stepped into his big runabout and departed in the opposite direction.

The reporter walked aimlessly. "The biggest sensation the old town ever had," he said to himself. "A smoother bit of newspaper work than many of my age have ever done. A thousand dollars reward! Four lives that might better have ended before it ever happened."

The enthusiasm Mr. Cecil always felt when he had obtained important news showed itself, if it existed now, in quite a singular manner. He hung his head in meditation. His steps were lagging and his whole air was one of depression and despair. By degrees he returned again to the street on which the office of the Tribune was situated. He quickened his steps as he came near that building, too, and his countenance brightened. He saw Jim Wells just ahead of him, hurrying in with some good story for the

The four lads bent over the message.

last edition. It was due to go to press within the hour.

The biggest news always went into the last edition, if it was something that could be kept. If printed earlier, the other papers could easily "lift" it, and in their own later editions exploit all details as their own. It was with a view to getting something important, possibly, for the last edition, that Abels, the city editor, had sent out for him, Cecil thought. He sighed and then suddenly stopped still.

A fresh sheet on the bulletin board had caught the reporter's eye. It read:

"Huckster Binski dies without leaving a clue to assailants. Reward increased to one thousand dollars."

"Dead," said Mr. Cecil to himself and his breath came quick and short. For an instant he hesitated, then turned quickly and went up the stairs to the editorial rooms two steps at a time.

"Heavens, Cecil! Where have you been all day? What have you got in the Binski business? The reward's a thousand dollars now,

boy! Binski's dead! Can't we close in on your case before the last edition goes down? A warrant for the arrest of that young gang will do it!"

It was the city editor speaking. His voice was quick and sharp, yet not unkind. "How have your tips panned out? Speak up! Act as if you were awake!" he went on, more harshly, as the reporter did not reply. "How have you made out, anyway?"

"Hang the reward!" said Mr. Cecil quietly. "Nothing doing. I've been barking up the wrong tree entirely. Those boys haven't been within a day's march of Binski's place for a month."

"The deuce they haven't!" exclaimed the city editor, in keen disappointment. "It took you a bloomin' long time to find it out!"

And so did the black storm clouds hanging so heavily over the Auto Boys lift and pass. For the present, at least, the lads were secure, thought Mr. Cecil.

CHAPTER XII

A MYSTERIOUS MESSAGE

Dave MacLester made the trip to Star Lake and back without mishap or adventure. The roads had dried and the Thirty ran beautifully. He saw the tracks of another car and rightly judged they were those of the auto the Star Lake club used, for he saw nothing of the three cousins at the resort.

Two of the men who had gone out on the first trip that morning returned to town with Dave, and he also carried a small box of fish, packed in ice, to deliver to an express office for shipment. For this service he received thirty cents. Thus, all in all, the first day of their enterprise proved very satisfactory to the Auto Boys.

Before dark the Thirty was washed, the brass work polished, the chains cleaned and every part requiring lubrication given careful atten-

tion. An extra early and special trip was to be made in the morning with Dr. Way, Mr. Worth and Mr. MacLester as passengers.

The day came bright and warm. The early morning trip was made before breakfast and very enjoyable it was. In the regular drives to the Lake Phil and Paul had their turns and all passed off smoothly. The Star Lake club did nothing more than make faces from an up-stairs window, but as this was on Phil's trip, and he paid no attention to them whatever, no harm was done. Indeed, the injury, if it could be called such, rebounded upon those who perpetrated it, for the Auto Boys had a good laugh over the silly action of the cousins, when Phil told of their ridiculous performance.

Several succeeding days passed without incident. The colored lad at the Brush hotel reported that Mr. Sagger, the uncle of the Star Lake club boys, was there, and his presence possibly kept those most amiable young gentlemen from any serious mischief.

The number of passengers for the Thirty

each day was quite satisfactory. The chief difficulty was, indeed, that for some trips there were more than could be accommodated. The rule, "first come, first served," was made to apply on such occasions and all went on smoothly. Only once, thus far, had the car made the run with no passengers, but as this was to be expected to happen more or less frequently, it was not a grievous disappointment.

On one trip, when there were but two passengers in the tonneau, Con Cecil suddenly appeared and climbed into the seat beside Phil, who held the wheel. He wanted only the ride, he said, and proposed to come back to town when the car returned.

"You ought to get a day off and try fishing," Phil suggested.

"I've got it," was the answer. "All my days are off."

"Do you mean you aren't working?"

"Yep; I'm too strong to work," laughed the reporter. "I'm not with the Tribune any more. Abels said he guessed they'd try to worry along

without me, and I took the hint before they threw me out."

There was a smile on the young newspaper man's lips as he spoke, but it found no echo in his heart. He made a good pretense of feeling jolly, but he was very blue and very melancholy, notwithstanding.

For Cecil stood discharged from the Tribune's reportorial staff. The Binski case was responsible for it. In his heart the young man no doubt felt himself something of a martyr. He believed he knew, beyond all doubt, who the assailants of the huckster were; but it was because he reported to his chief that there was no prospect that he could help him to obtain the one thousand dollars reward that he had been dismissed.

The disappointment of Mr. Abels when Cecil had reported himself as having been "barking up the wrong tree" was keen. He had placed great confidence in the young reporter's judgment and work in the past. Based on the latter's first reports, he had believed the Tribune

assured of an important and exclusive news story and himself of a share in the reward. When Mr. Cecil came in, at the last moment, however, saying "nothin' doing," the city editor was decidedly irritated.

"Cecil," he said, "you've fallen down just when I most depended on you to make good. You should have found out you were on the wrong track before spending so much time on it. But get busy! Don't run after every bit of gossip you hear, or tag the police around. Get on a fresh trail. The police jump at the conclusion that robbery was the motive. Take the theory that it was revenge, instead. Get busy! I'll bet a hat I'd find something if I wasn't tied to the desk! But find a fresh start, son. On the job, now! On the job!"

How utterly useless it was for Con Cecil to start out to discover something, which he was sure he had already discovered, and which he now only wished to conceal, may easily be imagined. He made a pretense of enthusiastic interest in a renewed attempt to solve the mys-

tery, but only until out of sight of the Tribune office. Then his feet lagged and he pondered deeply upon his perplexing position. Certainly he could not do his duty to the paper while pretending to work on the Binski case. His time would be wholly wasted. He saw before him only constant repetitions of his report, "nothin' doing."

Upon going to the office the following morning, Cecil told Mr. Abels that he had absolutely nothing new to report and asked to be relieved of further work on the Binski mystery.

"Cold feet!" growled the city editor. "First you fell down on what looked like easy money, now you want to lie down on the whole job."

"Well, I've found as much as the police have," the reporter answered.

"Hang the police! I don't care what the whole force and all the detectives have *not* done. If you're no better than a policeman, we don't want you."

"I thought you'd put Wells, or maybe Daley,

on the case and let me go back to my regular route," Cecil suggested.

"Think again," said Mr. Abels, irritably.

"I will," said Cecil, hotly. "I think I'll look for another job."

"I think you better," snapped the chief, and turned to his desk.

Con Cecil went to the business office and got his money. Later in the day he called at the offices of the other two daily papers in Lannington but found no prospect of a position at either of them.

The outlook was truly discouraging. Dependent on his own efforts for support, the young reporter keenly felt the necessity of having employment. There arose in his mind many times during the days that followed the question whether his decision to shield his four friends had been a wise one. He gained by the course he had chosen not even a "thank you" from those he protected, for they would never know he saved them. His sole reward was his solitary reflection that he might be the means of

keeping the four boys from imprisonment and perhaps worse, and their families from disgrace. On the other hand, he was giving up the prestige his clever detective work would mean, a large share in the reward of one thousand dollars, and his position as well.

Again and again Cecil asked himself if he had done right. Although he had found his answer to be in the affirmative each time thus far, repeatedly did he allow the question to come into his mind for further consideration. It had been in his thoughts when he saw Phil Way heading the auto toward Star Lake, with the seat beside him unoccupied. On the impulse of the moment he ran to the car and climbed aboard.

"What are you going to do now?" Phil asked the reporter, deftly rounding a corner and sounding the horn for a clear track ahead.

"Guess I'll go after the reward in the Binski case," said Mr. Cecil with a quick, significant glance at his companion. "I'm pretty near conceited enough to think I could get it—if I wanted to."

"It's more than the police have done," Phil answered calmly.

"Cool as a cucumber," thought Cecil. "But a wise one, too. He didn't ask 'Why don't you then?' or 'Why don't you want to do it?' I've a notion to tell him anyway."

However, the reporter refrained from speaking further of the subject. A remark from one of the passengers in the tonneau showed that his words had evidently been overheard. He had no wish to embarrass Phil Way, and he would not have spoken as he had already done but for his belief that the steady purr and rumble of the car kept those in the rear from hearing.

Uncle Joe Brush, who had a particular faculty for making acquaintances among newspaper men, knew Con Cecil very well, of course. Many a time the reporter had made favorable mention of the Brush hotel in the Tribune and the genial proprietor was duly appreciative.

"Well, if here isn't the editor himself!" Mr. Brush exclaimed, as the Thirty stopped before the big porch. "Looking sharper than the point

of his own pencil, I declare! What deceiving things looks are, aren't they?"

Laughing with the greatest delight at his own joke, Uncle Joe shook hands with Cecil and also welcomed the other two passengers.

"Well, I see you weren't satisfied till you killed Binski off, poor fellow," Mr. Brush continued, turning to Cecil. "Mighty poor chance anybody has these days if he gets into the hands of the reporters! I'd rather have a million dollars! But cre—ation! Why don't you tell us who did the Binski job, anyway?"

"We might do that even yet!" Cecil answered, with a laugh.

"What did he say?" asked one of the Star Lake club boys of another, all three men sitting on the top step of the porch.

"Just shooting off about finding who swatted that huckster," came the answer in an undertone, but Phil, who had been keeping one eye on the three youths, caught the words. Something further was said in the same low tone but at this moment Uncle Joe called loudly for "Kit

Carson''— the colored boy, of course,—and Phil heard no more.

In due time the auto returned to town and Con Cecil sat beside the driver. Once or twice he made some reference to the mysterious assault and robbery, but Phil's answers appeared to show that he did not care to talk about that subject.

To the reporter this seemed very natural. He saw in his friend's apparent disinclination to discuss the Binski case still further reason for believing all that he did believe in connection with that matter. The reflection moved him to say, in a tone of very serious kindness: "I'm going to tell you this, Phil, that though I may know more about that affair than even you suspect, my mouth is shut. Now let's say no more about it."

Considerably puzzled by both Cecil's manner and his words, Phil could only reply, "Well, *don't* talk about it then." Indeed, he felt much inclined to the opinion that his friend was really becoming just a little crazy over that one sub-

ject, anyway. Gladly enough would he do his part in refraining from its further discussion.

Cecil left the car at the park entrance for Dave, Paul and Billy were in waiting to go for a run through the country. It was one of those days when there was little work to be done and the boys improved all such opportunities to enjoy the auto in company. A ride to the neighboring town of Champsville was in prospect and, as they must be back by noon, the Thirty whizzed away quite a bit faster, it is very much to be feared, than the city speed ordinance declared lawful.

Con Cecil waved a good-bye, then started aimlessly up the street. By chance he wandered into the central police station, called, "Hello!" to the captain in charge, and sat down at a table reserved for the news gatherers. No reporters were present at just this time, however, and with a half-sigh, half-yawn Cecil was soon rising to go, when the captain with a nod invited him into his office.

"Since you aren't on the paper now, I'll tell you something if you can keep it to yourself," the officer said.

"Me for that, then," was the answer. "It isn't the Binski case, is it?"

"Nothing else," the police captain replied. "Look at this." He took from a small drawer of his desk a postal card. It was sadly soiled, but plainly written upon it with pencil was the message:

"If you want to know who robbed Mike Binski find the boys that were at his place about dusk that Saturday night. A Friend."

Cecil's heart beat fast. For a few seconds he could not trust himself to speak. The tremor of his voice might point to his own secret.

"What do you make of it?" the captain inquired, at last. "It's the only new clue we've found in a week."

"Rats!" exclaimed Con Cecil with contempt most admirably feigned. "Somebody's stringing you. I hope you aren't going to let any

joke-smith make laughing stock of the police department at this stage of the game. Let me look at that card again."

CHAPTER XIII

A NIGHT TRIP AND AN ADVENTURE

Little suspecting the things that were in the mind of their friend, the young reporter,—little dreaming what storm clouds of trouble threatened them as the police sought to find the meaning of the card Con Cecil had seen,—the Auto Boys worked hard, played hard, and enjoyed keenly the use and the care of their car.

True, the regular schedule adopted for the Star Lake passenger service must be maintained, and the machine could not often be taken out for long trips; but frequently in the moonlight of the delightful June evenings there were runs to adjacent towns, or delightful little tours through the parks and the surrounding country.

The excellent behavior of the Thirty at nearly all times was a subject of not a little talk among other owners of automobiles in the city. Mr.

Knight frequently referred to the boys and their machine as an example of what good care, reasonably careful driving and a good understanding of the mechanism of an automobile could do in keeping a car out of the repair shop. Several times he sent prospective customers to talk with the four friends concerning the cost of operating an auto, and in more than one instance they were undoubtedly instrumental in assisting him to make sales.

But notwithstanding their good fortune in having few repair bills, the Auto Boys were not clearing as much money with the car as they had hoped and expected to do. Gasoline was expensive and, oh, what quantities it seemed to take! A front tire that was bumped hard against the curbing, one day, was ruptured and the tube blew out within a few miles. A new casing or shoe had to be bought and it took nearly a week's earnings to pay for it.

"I see where the auto business bankrupts the American Contract Company," growled Dave MacLester, with characteristic pessimism.

"There's a card above Mr. Knight's desk at the garage that says, 'Most of our troubles never happen.' I wish he'd give it to you, Dave, to hang around your neck," Phil Way answered.

Paul Jones' words to Dave were, "Forget it!"

Billy Worth also felt hopeful, but he remarked that, as a business proposition, it should be remembered the Auto consumed more gasoline that was chargeable to fun than the quantity which could rightly be charged to the passenger service. Whereupon Dave MacLester proposed that the account covering the cost of operating the machine be divided. One would represent expense for fuel, oil, and so on, used in the passenger business, the other the items chargeable to pleasure. To make the division fair and equitable, the cost of maintenance should be reckoned on a mileage basis. If the car were run twenty miles a day for business purposes and ten miles, or thirty miles, for fun, the record should show the figures.

"Sure thing!" said Billy Worth. "But we want an odometer."

"Now then, Billy, you get that notion out of your head mighty quick," Phil Way remonstrated. "Dave's plan for keeping separate records is a good one. I like the scheme first-rate and hope we'll do it; but we can estimate the mileage all right. At any rate we've no money to spare for an odometer till we've got our note paid."

"Oh-ho! I knew it was bothering you, old boy! How about your troubles that never happen, now?" crowed Dave.

"No such thing," protested Phil. "I merely don't want to go in for things we can do without until we have made the last payment on the car."

"Fine thing to have an odometer, though," urged Billy Worth. Paul thought so too. Phil was forced to agree and Dave had been more than willing all along.

The outcome of the whole discussion was that some extra work with the car should be engaged

whenever opportunity offered and the income so obtained, less the expense, be placed in a separate fund for the purchase of the mileage indicator.

With this in view, word was left at Knight & Wilder's and at two other garages which did no auto livery business that if inquiries came to them for the use of a car and driver, such applicants might be accommodated by telephoning to the Auto Express and Transportation Company. The telephone number supplied was that of Dr. Way's residence. Mrs. Way's maid very cheerfully agreed to report all calls promptly to the little green and yellow home of the Thirty, and the four friends remained much of the time beneath the elms, on the back lawn, to be in readiness.

The regular trips to Star Lake were, of course, continued as usual. It was only in the late forenoon and early evening of each day, that there was much chance to earn the extra money desired. However, the second evening after the new plan was entered upon there came

a summons. Mr. Wilder telephoned that three gentlemen wished to be taken at once to the Lake, to spend the night with some friends at one of the cottages.

It was Billy Worth's turn to go. Phil answered over the telephone that the car would be at the garage in a jiffy. Paul and Dave helped light the lamps and in a very little time the machine was under motion. For some reason or another, very likely because it was more business-like, Billy went alone. In view of what happened, he would have been glad to have had company.

It was a delightful evening. The moon had not yet risen, but the stars shone brightly, and the air was soft and sweet. Billy found his three passengers to be mature men who evidently had recently been staying at Star Lake. Although he did not recognize them, they seemed quite familiar with the resort, as they talked among themselves.

As the Thirty rolled smoothly along under the fine old trees bordering the road, just be-

yond the city, another car came up behind and with a blast of its horn, unnecessarily loud and long, ran past. Billy recognized the Star Lake boys when the glare of his own headlights fell upon them and their machine as they dashed into the center of the roadway in front. Almost unconsciously he speeded up.

Rapidly the Thirty gained on the auto ahead and, if the road had permitted it, the young driver would certainly have made an attempt to pass the Star Lake outfit. Whether he would have succeeded he did not have a chance to find out, for, as he put his foot on the accelerator, the passenger beside him said rather sharply, "No speeding here, son. We're in no such hurry as that."

Billy retarded the spark somewhat and slowed the car down. A jeering shout came from the Star Lake boys as they observed that he ceased pursuit of them.

"Now, you see, we get the laugh," said the lad regretfully to the older man.

"Don't let that bother you," was the answer.

"Those young muttonheads are a bad lot, I'm afraid. Don't let them get you into trouble, for they'll do it if they can. Hello, what's that?"

Billy had already prepared to stop the car, as a waving lantern suddenly appeared in the roadway a few hundred feet ahead.

"What's the signal?" he called out, and brought the machine to a halt, just as they came up to an elderly man, still frantically waving a lantern.

"They've killed my colt, that's what it means," the man cried harshly. "The automobile that went by, just a few minutes ago, struck my colt and there he is!"

The old fellow let the lantern-light fall upon the body of the three-months-old animal, half obscured by the tall grass in the roadside ditch.

"Now you see what such fool speeding does," said the passenger who had objected to fast driving.

"It's a blamed shame," cried Billy Worth, jumping down from the car. "How did it happen?"

"They'll pay for this if I find out who they be!" the farmer said savagely. "How did it happen? I'll tell ye how it happened! I was leading the poor thing up from the lot where we shut it up while the mother's in harness during the day. I heard the automobile coming and got clean over here by the ditch. What did the rascals do, though, but crowd close to my side, seemin' to be tryin' to scare me. I had just time to jump out of the way, but before I could drag the colt after me, they hit him and run over him. By the Old Harry, somebody'll sweat for this! An' the rascals never even stopped! Just yelled, 'Keep out o' the way then, ye old fool!' an' went on. I'll lose a week's time, right now in harvest, but what I'll find out who they be, though! I'm not a swearin' man, but by the eternal, if it ain't enough to rile a saint!"

"An outrage!" spoke up Billy's front seat passenger. "You don't need to lose any time finding out who the cowards were, though, I'm mighty glad to say. They are three smart Alecs

who are staying at the Brush hotel at the Lake. Just you get Uncle Joe Brush after them! He'll make them settle!"

"You saw 'em, did ye?" the farmer inquired anxiously.

"It couldn't have been anybody but them," one of the other men replied. "They passed us not more than a mile back, and no other car has been this way."

"Joe Brush will fix 'em," said the former speaker. "Better see him the first thing in the morning."

"You can go along to the lake with us right now, if you want to," suggested Billy. "I'm coming straight back and you can ride both ways. It won't cost you anything."

The old gentleman accepted the invitation and soon the Thirty was under motion again. Star Lake was reached without further loss of time and the three passengers conducted the still angry farmer to Uncle Joe Brush forthwith.

Billy Worth remained in the car but he over-

heard much of the conversation with Mr. Brush, who sat smoking on the big porch. The genial landlord made no attempt to conceal his anger and contempt that guests at the Brush hotel should misconduct themselves. He at once summoned Pete Whaley,—using the real name of the colored boy for the first time within anyone's memory—and bade him send the three offenders to him.

The Star Lake club members were not, however, to be found. Evidently fearing trouble, they had hurriedly put away their car and disappeared. They only postponed the time of reckoning by this conduct. Uncle Joe Brush meant business when he said that the owner of the colt would not only be paid for his loss, but receive an apology, to boot. Feeling much better because of this assurance, the farmer presently mounted to the seat beside Billy to return home.

As the Thirty ran slowly down the drive and onto the main road, voices from some shrubbery close by called out in malicious tones: "Fine

business you're in, you little sneak! We'll fix you good and plenty for this!"

"When you get your head broke, you young snipe, you'll know who did it!"

Very well did Billy Worth understand that these threats and epithets were intended for him. Very well he knew the voices, though he could not see the speakers.

"Any old day!" he just could not resist calling out in answer. Precisely what he meant might be hard to say. In general, however, his words conveyed an acceptance of any challenge that might be delivered and, at the same time, expressed his supreme contempt for the challengers. He wished Phil or Dave or Paul, or all three, were with him. Perhaps it was just as well they were not.

"I'll be downright sorry if your giving me a lift has made trouble for ye with them rascals," said the farmer.

"Don't you worry about that for the twentieth part of a second," answered Billy valiantly. "Those chaps never have liked our

crowd nor we them. I'm only afraid there will have to be a mix-up, though, some day."

And Billy Worth was right, although the trouble came in a way and at a time when he was little expecting and no better prepared for it.

Although the Star Lake trio had carefully refrained from showing themselves, they had heard enough of what was said on the hotel porch to know that their cowardly conduct had been quickly found out and as quickly laid at the proper door. For this they blamed Billy Worth. In their minds there was no doubt that he had told the owner of the colt who killed the pretty creature and, more than that, had promptly brought the old fellow straight to Mr. Brush.

It was late when the three cousins finally sneaked into the hotel and to their room; but before they did so they had formed a plot for revenge which, for contemptible meanness, cowardice and wickedness, could scarcely have been worse. Come what might, with regard to the

settlement their uncle would have to make in their behalf for the mischief they had done that night, they would make some one suffer, they told themselves, and there was no doubt they meant it.

Meanwhile Billy had taken his farmer passenger to his own door and proceeded on to town and home alone. It was still early and Phil and Paul were in waiting at the garage. That Dave was not there, also, was due to no fault of his own. He had been called home because there was company there.

"Plague take it all!" he said as the summons reached him, "I wish they'd take my measure every week or so and keep it handy. Here I'm in before it's time and, 'Why, how David grows!' is all there'll be to it anyway."

However, Dave heard the news Billy brought before he went to bed. He had no thought of retiring without first telephoning to ask if the auto had returned, and of course Phil told him all that had happened.

"I'm going to land somewhere near those

blessed idiots, if ever I get a chance," said Dave. He spoke with decided warmth but his very guarded tone seemed to indicate that he was not speaking for the information of his own household. "I'll land like a small cyclone, too, you better believe."

And now, if by these remarks, Mr. David MacLester meant to say that he would undertake to administer some form of proper punishment to the trio of cousins, otherwise known as the Star Lake club, if the opportunity should offer, it remains only to be stated that he quickly had the chance.

CHAPTER XIV

A NEW BERTH FOR CECIL

Although hopeful that his ridicule of the postal the Captain of Police had shown him might cause the officers to ignore that anonymous message, Con Cecil was far from confident. He was worried. Unfortunately, his face and manner to some extent betrayed this fact to his blue-coated friend.

"Either Cecil knows something of where that card came from, or he is still doing detective work on the case himself and is afraid the card helps us to get ahead of him," thought the captain when the erstwhile reporter had gone. "Looks as if the thing were mighty well worth all the attention we can give it, and we don't get the laugh from the newspapers so long as they know nothing about it. So here is one item that the reporters don't get—at least, not yet."

Leaving the police station, Cecil strolled to the park to sit down and think. What should he do? With the clue the card afforded, the officers might discover all that he already knew, at any hour. The thought was dreadful. And who in the world had sent the postal to the police? Contrary to what had been his most confident belief, there was evidently someone besides himself who knew Binski's assailants. If this were true, the Auto Boys might at any time be confronted with serious charges and placed under arrest regardless of all he had done, or could do, to keep their secret.

Then the thought came to Cecil that, since it was so probable that the whole ugly story would come to the surface very soon, anyway, why should he not sell his knowledge to the Tribune or some other newspaper, and also obtain the reward? But instantly he banished the idea from consideration. He could not think of yielding to temptation now.

What his next act should be, however, was the young newspaper man's puzzle. He wanted

to find the author of that postal, if possible, and he wanted to warn his four friends, that they might be prepared for the worst. But on the other hand, if he could locate the sender of the card, it might be that he would find there was no need of his being so disturbed; that the postal was a hoax or that the writer had no information which would put the blue-coats on the trail of the Auto Boys.

After a time Cecil returned to the police station, still undecided as to his best course of action. He asked the captain for another look at the writing and undertook, also, to ascertain what the police intended doing in regard to the hint it contained.

The young man's request to see the card again was readily granted. He noted carefully the coarse, heavy hand in which it was written. More than this, when the captain's back was turned, he traced every word on thin paper placed over the card.

Regarding the use the police intended making

of the mysterious message, the captain was decidedly uncommunicative.

"What would *you* do with it, now?" he asked Cecil. "Do you really think it just a prank or is it serious? Who do you suppose sent the card and, above all, why did he send it? And here's another thing, Con," the officer went on, as his questions were greeted with a negative shake of the head, "here's another thing, I say: Why the deuce are you so curious and inquisitive? By hokey, I believe you know a good bit more than you are willing to confess. Come now, spit it out!"

"Oh, forget it, Captain! You're too wise to hand out anything like that. Your old department has been roasted enough for not getting hide nor hair of anybody connected with the Binski business. Seems to me I'd not do anything to stir the papers up again. They've about forgotten it now."

"Yes, I guess so," returned the captain, drumming idly on his desk but still watching Cecil closely. "Just as I told you before,

though, I wouldn't have shown you the card at all if you were still on the paper."

"Personally, I'd give a lot more to know who sent the card than to find the people it refers to," Cecil replied, and he spoke the truth in saying so. Well he knew the boys to whom the card had reference. His words conveyed the impression that he believed there were no such persons, however, quite as he intended they should.

"Can't tell," said the captain. "You can't more than guess at the motive back of it. Rather odd, though, that anybody should send the postal to divert suspicion from himself, for it's common property that we haven't had anyone under suspicion for a week."

"All the more reason for believing the message don't amount to anything. In fact it's a cinch, I'd say, that someone is trying to pull off a joke on the department. What does the chief say?"

"Not a word. I've handled the whole case lately. In confidence, I'll give you a tip that

there are other things doin' just now in the chief's line. This mustn't go a word further, mind you, but an all around bad man, one with a record a yard long, it looks now, is going to be caught, one of these days, and I rather think he'll be landed right here in Lannington."

Cecil would not have appeared quite natural had he failed to show marked interest in this communication, and he did so with a number of guarded questions; but his thoughts were still of the Auto Boys and the grave danger he felt to be so near them. Still, he failed to get any satisfaction from his friend, the captain, as to how seriously he regarded the anonymous postal. Forced at last to the conclusion that the officer had talked to him mainly for the purpose of getting information for himself, and not with the intention of imparting any, the reporter said, "So long." Then he took his heavy thoughts homeward.

It wasn't much of a home that Mr. Cecil had, just a room in a dwelling a few blocks from the business district. Still, it was a place to rest

and sleep, and a place to put upon the walls a great variety of trophies, souvenirs, and pictures,—everything, almost, from a cob pipe that was his own to a green veil that was not; a photograph of a popular actor, the menu cards of expensive hotels; nothing of much value, intrinsic or otherwise, but each item in the strange inventory possessed of its own little story that made it worth while in the owner's eyes.

Usually Cecil had received his mail at the Tribune office. Now that he no longer did so, he glanced anxiously about for possible letters as he entered his much bedecked apartment. To his surprise he found one. The envelope bore the return card of the Westerfield Leader. "Another answer to that string of applications—another gentle turn-down," he sighed.

But about five seconds later Mr. Cecil's countenance wore a very changed expression. "A job! Well, what do you know about that?" he exclaimed, joyfully. "Well, I'll be jiggered!"

The letter was brief. "We can put you on if you are here Thursday," it read. "The situ-

ation will be permanent if you make good." The signature was, "Westerfield Leader, Frank Hardin, city editor."

"Make good? just watch me!" said Mr. Cecil, and again expressed the profound conviction that he be "jiggered," also that he would be "dinged." Neither of these anticipated happenings seemed to cause the young gentleman the least alarm, however, notwithstanding the really dreadful sound of the names he gave them. Instead, he smiled at himself in the glass above his bureau dresser and looked altogether pleasant. Then came suddenly a change in his reflections which also changed his look of pleasure.

Like a wave of sorrow, seeming stronger for having been for a time forgotten, memory of the danger closing in on his friends, the Auto Boys, came to Cecil's thoughts. What in the world should he do? he asked himself. To-morrow would be Thursday. He must go to Westerfield on the evening train.

For a long time the troubled boy—he was

scarcely twenty-one—debated the question before him. "I'll give them warning," he said at last. "It is all I *can* do."

Without further delay Cecil sat down and wrote:

"Dear Phil: Don't read this till you are by yourself. When you have read it, maybe you will know what to do, but I can't tell you, much as I wish I could. Perhaps you better talk with your father about it. I've tried to stave off the chance that anybody else might find out the sorry facts that I was so surprised to blunder onto. I would have sworn no one but myself knew anything about it. I fear now that someone may. The worst of it is, I don't know who. If I could stay here I might be able to help you, but I've got a job on the Leader in Westerfield and have to go there to-night. Don't know when I'll be back, even for a day. But here's the information I want you and your bunch to have. The police have just received a post-card reading like the slip of paper pinned to this letter. In fact, the writing was traced from the

card and is just the same in every way. When you've read it, you will know all that I know. How much importance the police attach to the information, I can't say, but I fear a great deal. For goodness' sake, be careful what you do—all of you. I am so mortal sorry for it all,—but that can't do you any good, and though I've tried, I am afraid I can't either, except to keep my mouth shut, and you can bank on that for all time. Yours, whatever happens, Con Cecil."

Cecil read and re-read the letter when it was finished, but again and again he laid it down. It was with a sort of desperation that, at last, he enclosed both papers in an envelope and mailed them. The load was somewhat off his mind when he had done this. He dressed for his journey, packed his suit-case and was ready. He would send for his trunk and other belongings when he had earned the money to pay his room-rent, now three weeks in arrears.

Westerfield was a considerably larger city than Lannington. It was the metropolis of the section. The wealthier people of the smaller

town—eighty miles distant—and other lesser cities and villages within about the same radius, shopped there, visited there, attended the theatre there. The very fashionable thing to do, at any time , indeed, was to spend the day in Westerfield.

Con Cecil stepped off the train at the Westerfield station feeling quite important. He liked the thought of working in the larger city. The Leader was a widely known and influential paper, too, and to be on its staff he properly regarded as an honor.

He hoped the newspaper workers back in Lannington would not fail to learn of his new connection, though he had refrained from announcing his departure. His friends would be all the more impressed, he considered, if they heard the news by accident. He looked forward, even now, to going back for a day after he had "made good." He pictured himself swinging breezily into the police captain's office, and the pleasure that official would have in

shaking hands with him, the representative of a great newspaper.

This train of thought brought Cecil to less happy reflections concerning the probable fate of the Auto Boys, and he was obliged to dismiss the whole subject from his mind. He was very anxious to succeed. He knew he must not let other matters occupy his attention if he would accomplish this, and at an inexpensive hotel he went to bed leaving a call for six o'clock next morning.

As the Leader was a morning paper, Cecil found, next day, that he would have to wait until afternoon to see the city editor, to be formally engaged and assigned to work. The looked-for, yet dreaded interview came in due time. Mr. Frank Hardin said, rather brusquely, as he looked his new man over: "With the experience you have had, you ought to get on all right. But it's up to you. We'll start you in at fifteen dollars a week. If you make good, you'll get more."

"I'll give you the best I've got," Cecil an-

swered just a bit timidly. "As I told you, I've done pretty much everything in Lannington except politics; but wherever you put me, I'll be on the job every minute."

"The fact is," said Hardin, rather more kindly, "I have some special work for you to do. Right off the reel I'll say you're a sight younger than I judged when I read your application, and personally I don't take much stock in cub reporters. So don't blame me if you fall down. Now I don't mean that I expect you will fall down or I wouldn't risk spoiling a big story by letting you tackle it. The point is that I am putting the whole responsibility onto you. If you want to duck, then, the time to do it is right now."

"Of course I don't know yet what you want me to do, but—Well, whatever the job is, it's me for it," said Cecil, confidently.

"I picked you for this work largely because of your living in Lannington and your acquaintance there," the city editor continued with a half smile at the other's earnestness. "Boiled

right down to bare facts, here's what you're up against. There's a man named Sacker here in Westerfield who poses as a lawyer, but hasn't had a case in court in ten years. He lives high, spends a lot of money and travels with the four hundred. Nobody knows, apparently, where he gets his coin. He has been suspected of everything from highway robbery to gambling, but never a thing has been fastened on him."

Mr. Hardin paused, noted that Cecil was following every word, and then went on, "Very well. This sort of thing,—now just let this fact soak in,—has been going on for a long time. The latest is a three-card swindle worked on an old codger named Spindle out here in Orange township. Sacker did the work, or at least he had a hand in it. We don't know this, don't forget, but we *think* it. For, you see, Sacker's got the whole burg bluffed to a standstill. The police are afraid of him. They've made a mess of it every time they've tried to connect him up with any sort of crookedness, and, as I said, the whole town is simply bluffed right and left.

Not that the man's popular, except with a certain gang of the grafting politicians, but that he is an all around sport and yet keeps himself so high and mighty that even good people are afraid to say 'boo.'"

Mr. Hardin again paused. Cecil nodded to say he grasped all that had been said.

"All right then," the city editor continued, as if in answer. "What I want you to do is pin this Spindle job where it belongs. Sacker doesn't know you, of course. He does know all our regular men. You can watch him better than anybody else, and also find out what he does in Lannington so much of the time. Just in a general way we know he has been there a part of nearly every week since May. There's a hen on there, somewhere, you can gamble on that. But if you can find out who got the two thousand that Spindle parted with, the number of other things we'll uncover at the same time will give this old town a sensation a day for about a month. Get the files and first

of all familiarize yourself with what has been already printed. Then get busy."

"You bet," said Cecil, eagerly.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAP ON THE NORTH SHORE

A very thorough discussion of Billy Worth's adventure on the night trip to the Lake, and particularly the threats of the Star Lake club, took place in the garage under the elms the morning following those occurrences.

"Sam Carew's been hanging around with that Star Lake gang," announced Paul Jones in the midst of the conversation. "He's a fine young pup!"

"Telling 'em about the touring car his uncle in Chicago is going to send him, I suppose," said Phil, with one of his quiet smiles. "Sam will either fool them a lot or get fooled himself, all right."

"Oh, Sam thinks they're just the candy because they come from Westerfield. Let them believe half what Sam tells *them* and they'll

think he's the whole thing in this town. Good match, all around, I say," declared Paul.

"Like Sam's uncle in Chicago—just wind and bluff—on both sides," laughed Billy Worth. "But we don't need mind Sam nor the Star Lake club, either. I want to say again that those fellows will no more try to do anything worse than play dirty little tricks with the car, providing they get the chance, than they'll try to fly. They're long on talk from a distance, but it all ends there. They've made threats before. Whatever came of them? Not a blessed thing. No, sir! Except to look out for wire nails and glass and stuff in the road, we shouldn't pay the least attention to 'em. They won't dare scatter too much junk around, either, for fear their own tires may pick up some of it."

Dave MacLester was little inclined to agree with Billy's statement. His Scotch blood was up and he was just a trifle more disposed to look for trouble than to avoid it. Phil and Paul, however, sided with Worth. On account of the pleasant relations with Uncle Joe Brush

and all the guests and campers at the Lake, they hoped there would be no serious clash with the three cousins. If it came, they wouldn't run; they'd fight to the finish, fully realizing though they did, that any such affair must be more or less disgraceful to all concerned.

As the time for the morning trip to the Lake drew near, the talk changed to other subjects. Phil was to make the run this time, and the graceful Thirty moved off, under his now experienced hand, as lightly as a feather.

Scarcely was Phil gone when who should come strolling down the alley but the head of the Grand Syndicate, so lately under discussion, Sam Carew himself.

"Seems to me Phil Way gets more than his share of the Lake trips," he remarked jocularly. "Wouldn't stand for it."

"What's it to you?" demanded Paul Jones, bristling up like a porcupine.

"Nope; even Stephen all around," answered Billy Worth, more pleasantly. "Every man has his turn."

"You were out just last night, weren't you, Bill?" Sam asked, seating himself with the others in the doorway of the little garage.

"Yes, how did *you* know?" was the answer.

Sam hesitated. "Oh," he said, "I just thought —I thought I saw you coming in from that way."

"What time?" inquired Billy.

"Don't know, for the life of me. I was just rambling around and didn't pay any attention." Sam was so accustomed to lying that, once started, he spoke quite glibly.

"It was an extra trip," said Worth, having no reason for not offering the information.

"Well, I didn't mean anything when I said Phil got more than his share," Sam answered. "Just seemed as if he did. Whose turn next?"

"Dave goes this afternoon, Paul to-morrow morning and I to-morrow afternoon, unless there's a special in between," Billy replied. "Just as I told you, it's even Stephen in everything with our gang. Hear you're getting real

chummy with the Willie boys at the Lake, Sam; how about it?"

"They've been hanging around me some. Want me to go out to the Lake and stay with them. Gee! Their uncle's a swell! Rich as a mint, too!"

"As rich as your uncle in Chicago?" asked Dave MacLester, slyly.

"I reckon either one of 'em could buy up a whole Scotch colony if he wanted to," snapped Sam, referring, of course, to Dave's Scottish descent. Without another word he arose and walked away, moodily shuffling his feet through the dust.

The significance of Sam's unexpected call and the questions he asked went unnoticed by the Auto Boys at the time. Later they had occasion to remember them. They discovered Sam Carew in his true colors, liar, braggart and traitor that he was. If they had chanced to follow him this morning they would have found out his villainy earlier, though not more completely, than they did.

It was to a telephone station that Sam sulkily betook himself. He asked the operator for the Brush house at Star Lake. Martin Waldo was soon on the line, and Sam informed him that Billy Worth would make the regular auto trip to the Lake the following afternoon.

"Or," said he, "if their car is out on a special trip before that, Worth will be just so much earlier. You'll have to watch for any special, then. Oh, yes, sure I'll let you know anything I hear or can find out. I'll call up about tomorrow night, if I don't see you. I want to know what happens. I had a deuce of a time to find out when the one you want would be out there. No, I didn't hear them say a word about anything that happened last night. Oh, yes, sure! I hadn't heard a word, of course. They'd have got wise right off if they had known you'd been talking to me."

This was the substance of Sam's end of the conversation, and he hung up the telephone receiver.

Perhaps it should be said, to the credit of

his conscience, Sam felt guilty and mean; but in all probability Benedict Arnold felt the same. Who has ever known a traitor and a spy made happy by his infamy? But the shame and stinging remorse will always come too late. There is no step backward, to peace of mind again, after the folly is committed And it was so in Sam's case. Not for many a day did he hear the last of his betrayal of a neighbor and a friend,—for Billy and he had always been on good terms and friendly, though in no sense chums.

Promptly on time Phil Way sounded the Thirty's horn, as he turned down the alley to drive into the garage. The other boys had been busy with various bits of work at Mr. Dilworth's and elsewhere during his absence, but before noon all were assembled once more beneath the elms. Phil's report was almost none at all. He had seen nothing of the Star Lake club, nor had he heard a word concerning the settlement Uncle Joe Brush would require of

those young gentlemen in behalf of the farmer whose colt was killed.

"There's a letter for you, Phil," called the maid from the kitchen window, as she noticed that he had returned.

"Much obliged, Julia, I'll get it pretty soon," the boy answered; but it chanced that he did not remember the subject again until the second day following.

Perhaps it was just as well. With all that happened, meanwhile, it were better, indeed, that Con Cecil's warning should for the time lie unopened in the library.

Paul returned from the regular run to the Lake the following morning with the information that the Star Lake club had been asked to pay sixty dollars for the killing of the farmer's colt. They would be allowed to obtain the money from their uncle presumably, and settle the matter quietly, or they would be placed under arrest and suit for damages brought besides. A promise to get the money at once had been made after much ugly conten-

tion on their part and so, it seemed, the incident would end.

Pete Whaley, otherwise "Buffalo Bill," etc., the colored boy, had given Paul the news of the adjustment of the damages. He had added as he did so: "You boys wants to keep yo' eyes peeled mighty sha'p fer dem rowdy cousins. Dey means ye ha'hm. 'Deed dey do!"

Paul repeated the young darkey's warning verbatim. "They haven't got me scared—not for a minute," said Billy Worth. But when the time for his trip to the Lake came, with the long afternoon wait there, before returning, Phil Way took him aside and earnestly cautioned him to be on his guard. He would be, and constantly, he said seriously. But whether he was or wasn't will soon be apparent.

Two passengers for the Lake were waiting for the Thirty that afternoon at the park entrance. Also waiting for the car was a rather seedy looking fellow who carried a small basket of groceries.

"How much to take this yere grub to the fur

side o' Star Lake?'' he asked, as Billy stepped down to open the tonneau door.

''Who's it for?'' was asked.

''Couple o' campers way on the fur side o' the Lake—the nort' side, up in the woods. Ye'll hev t' carry it clean back to their shack.''

''A quarter to leave it at the hotel for them,'' said Worth.

''Naw, they won't have it that way,'' the fellow coarsely insisted. ''Said I was to give ye one plunk to carry it back to their shack yerself an' say nothin' to nobody. Nawthin' to it but grub, but they said they was awful purtickler who comes there because they has their own place fer fishin' an' don't want none o' the hotel help or anybody spyin' on 'em.''

''I'll take it,'' said Billy with business-like promptness. The basket was placed in the car and he pocketed the dollar. ''All ready?'' he asked, and in another moment the motor chugged its warning that the Star Lake Thirty was on the way.

It was an unusually warm afternoon but at

the request of the lady and gentleman in the tonneau Billy ran quite slowly. How he did long to speed up for just a little way and get the rush of cooling air! His passengers were always his first consideration, however, and the machine purred along gently as the summer day itself.

All was quiet about the Lake. A couple of guests at the hotel were playing tennis on the court at the north side of the lawn, but no one else was near.

Peter Whaley, otherwise Andrew Jackson, was dozing in the shade of a chestnut near the back door of the establishment. Billy noticed him as he ran on to the shed, after his passengers had alighted. He nodded familiarly to the colored boy and the latter responded with a lazy wave of the hand.

"Now then, little basket, we'll explore the north side of the Lake," said the custodian of that piece of express matter to himself, when he had shut down the engine and put the Thirty in proper order for his absence.

Glad to see nothing of the amiable cousins, Billy set out at once along the path which mounted the hill to the north and presently lost itself in the woods bordering the bluff above the water. He did not doubt his ability to find his way, even after the path was left behind. He had only to keep near the edge of the bluff that descended to the Lake. The shack of the two fishermen could not be more than a mile and a half distant, at most. Less than two miles would take him well into the meadows beyond the tree-skirted shore.

While the path remained, it was pleasant walking through the deep shade of the overhanging trees. As a denser portion of the woods was reached, however, the heat increased. The slight breeze did not penetrate the thick growth, and mosquitoes and gnats were unpleasantly numerous.

Thinking only of delivering the basket and finishing the task quickly, Billy steadily made his way forward. Once he thought he heard low voices near him and stopped to listen, hoping the

sounds came from the camp he expected soon to see. But he heard nothing while he paused excepting the snapping of a twig and the faint rustle of the leaves, so forward he went.

A little further on the boy came upon a somewhat open space, surrounded by a considerable growth of underbrush on all sides. The camp of the fishermen must be near at hand, he thought. He had left the hotel a mile behind, at least. As he listened for some possible sound to guide him, he heard suddenly a rapid rush of many feet upon the ground. The rending of low bushes and fallen branches as they gave way was as if a strong wind had come sweeping down. Before Billy Worth, wholly unsuspecting such a thing, half realized what was before him, the three young ruffians known as the Star Lake club had one and all leaped upon him.

In vain did the helpless boy resist. Taken by surprise, he was on the ground and his face pressed into the loose, black mold before he could raise a hand. Fiercely he struggled. The perspiration ran from every pore of his body

as he put forth repeated efforts to gain his feet. Once he managed to shoot a right fist swiftly upward and the burly Pitt Sagger tumbled backward with a bloody chin, but in another minute both Billy's feet and hands were tightly bound with baggage straps and he could only lie panting as he looked about him.

It was with the vilest of language that the three cousins had accompanied their cowardly attack, and now, as they stood back and looked upon the blood-stained face of their victim, they let loose oaths and epithets that none but the most degraded would ever utter.

"Where's the groceries?" demanded Jay Waldo, when he had quite wearied himself with his foul talk. He grinned maliciously as the slow and heavy Sagger, still rubbing his battered chin, gathered up the scattered contents of the basket.

"Biggest dollar's worth we ever got for *our* money," Martin Waldo put in with savage glee. "Best of it is that we made the little whelp bring along the very things for the sport."

"Here's the salt, here's the pepper! Smear that cut in his face with it. But hold on! Yank his clothes off! These mosquitoes can be getting in their work while we rest."

"It's a long lane!" exclaimed Billy Worth through his clinched teeth. They were the only words he spoke. He did not add "that has no turning" and so complete the phrase, but he thought it and he believed in its truth. He had the sense to know that he was overpowered; that speech from him would but add to the vicious delight of those who wished him to show suffering and fruitless rage. Grimly he bore the pain. In silence he endured the indignities to which he was subjected. He showed fight when the chance offered, but for the most part he was wholly helpless.

To name all the cowardly acts of the three youths, whose courage and manliness were of so small a calibre that they would seek to punish their enemy only when, three against one, they had bound him hand and foot, is neither necessary nor desirable. They were both mean

and hateful. The climax came however, when Jay Waldo dictated an abject apology to the Star Lake club, Martin writing his words in a pocket memo-book. When finished the apology, just as it was written, read:

> "To the Gentlemen of the Star Lake club I make an appology of my Own free will, reckognising their excellents in everyway and feeling very sorry that I have Given them offents. I appologeys for speeking with out Being first spoaken two and I espechielly appolegeys for peeching to old man Brush and that farmer who kild the coalt and confess myself to be a meeslie snob when I did it."

"Now, you little snitcher, you've got to put your name to this," announced Jay Waldo, with the air of a tyrant king.

"I wouldn't sign that, or anything else, for all three of you together—but the papers to hang you," muttered the suffering boy with unyielding determination.

"Sign it, you sneaking rat," growled Jay,

bringing his fist hard against Billy's head, just back of the right ear.

They had released the captive's right hand from the straps and the clumsy but muscular Sagger held the free arm as if in a vice.

"Sign it! sign that apology or we'll kill you! Sign it, you cur!" almost shrieked Martin Waldo, and he brought a small, sharp chestnut sprout down stingingly on Billy's bare back. "Sign it!"

But the next instant the scene was changed. Martin Waldo went sprawling in the brushes ten feet away. Pitt Sagger landed at full length on his back just where he stood, and Jay Waldo doubled up under the influence of a swifter jolt than his ribs had had in all his life.

Martin rolled over and over but made no effort to rise. Sagger grabbed for his handkerchief to wipe his bleeding nose. Jay, alone, wheeled about as if to fight, but before he fairly saw who his antagonist would be, he also went tumbling in a heap, a thousand stars dancing before his surprised and astonished eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

A RAPID RUN TO STAR LAKE AND THE RESULT

The seemingly miraculous rescue of Billy Worth just when his very life had been threatened was the climax of the most exciting automobile run ever made between Lannington and Star Lake.

And for Billy's fortunate deliverance who was to be thanked? Peter Whaley,—black of skin, but white all through; true as steel and possessed of brains that he had learned to use. The colored boy, and no one else, had been the means of sending the timely assistance.

Happy and care-free, Pete had that morning answered to as many different names as he had received calls from Mr. Brush—ten or a dozen, at least. He had done all his work faithfully and well. In the lull of the afternoon, when the mid-day meal was over and the guests about

the hotel had dispersed for the time, some to take naps, some to indulge in rest or recreation in other forms, the versatile young darkey went for a quiet nap on the back lawn.

He saw Billy drive up in the Thirty and noticed lazily and, gladly, no doubt, that the two passengers were without baggage. It was unnecessary, then, for him to disturb himself, and, quite needless to mention, he didn't.

Still, Pete was not so far from wakefulness as to fail to observe the course Billy Worth took when he left the automobile to deliver the basket he carried. Indeed, he was so surprised to see the lad start off up the hill and along the north shore that he entirely awoke from his light doze, wondering where he could be going.

As Pete lay quietly meditating, his eyes half closed, the three members of the Star Lake club passed across the lawn within a few yards of him. He heard Jay Waldo say:

"Don't hurry, now. We've got to be about a mile down the bluff. No danger of anybody hearing that distance."

In the course of a day Uncle Joe's popular factotum heard so many portions of conversations that, ordinarily, he paid no attention to them. He might not have done so this time but for the sly stealth and venomous tone of the words he heard. They set him thinking. The suspicion grew in his mind that the trio of cousins were following Billy Worth. To satisfy himself he cautiously turned, and, feigning slumber, watched.

The three youths were keeping the trees and shrubbery between themselves and the hotel as much as possible. Pete noticed this fact at once. Their movements were not natural. They seemed to be sneakingly watching on all sides and yet trying to appear as if they were only out for an afternoon ramble.

Peter Whaley was convinced that something was wrong. He knew the characters of the three cousins and their hatred of the Auto Boys. He thought again of the words, "No danger of anybody hearing that distance," and their prob-

able significance rushed upon his mind like a whirlwind.

What should he do? Tell Mr. Brush? Summon help from among the guests and campers and hasten in pursuit? No, neither plan would do. The observing darkey well knew the desire of the Auto Boys to avoid annoying the jolly landlord with their quarrel with his guests. There was but one thing he could do. He must get Billy Worth's friends to the Lake at once, and without attracting too much notice.

Immediately his decision was made, Pete moved with all speed. Quietly but swiftly he entered the hotel and sought the telephone booth. Knowing of the boys' arrangement to receive special calls through the Knight & Wilder garage, he soon had that establishment on the line. Mr. Wilder answered. To him the colored lad made it plain that Phil Way, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones,—any one or all of them, if possible, were wanted at Star Lake immediately. Without stating the occasion of the sudden summons, Pete forcibly impressed the

junior partner at the garage with the fact that something was radically wrong and instant action was necessary.

"I'll have them out there in three shakes," Mr. Wilder almost shouted, and sprang from the telephone to Mr. Knight's big runabout standing idle to-day because of the senior partner's absence.

In a twinkling the light, powerful car was doing extreme violence to the speed ordinance as it raced toward Dr. Way's residence. Most luckily Phil, Paul and Dave were there, and not even back at their own little garage, but sitting on the porch as if for the express purpose of seeing Mr. Wilder drive furiously up.

"Pile in here!" the latter called excitedly, "you're wanted at the Lake as fast as this machine can get you there! All three of you!"

By the time the astonished boys had reached the curbing, Mr. Wilder had turned the car about. Springing out he said, "Pile in! You drive 'er, Way! Get to Star Lake quick as lightning. Something fierce is up! Don't know

what. Andrew Jackson Washington Bismarck —you know who— telephoned, scared to death! Let 'er out, now!"

If Mr. Wilder had been Con Cecil, and that young man had been rushing a car to aid the boys in sudden flight from the police that he believed fast closing in on them, he could not have been more urgent. Wholly disregarding their exclamations and questions, he pushed Phil to the driver's seat, Dave into the place beside him, and Paul to the rumble behind.

"Let 'er out, now! It may be life or death for all *we* know! Hang on, son!"

The latter words were for Paul, who had just time to clutch the supports provided for the occupant of the single rear seat, as the powerful machine leaped forward and was off.

"Something's happened to Bill, I bet!" shouted Phil Way above the terrific rush of the wind.

"Wha-a-a-t do-o you sup-pose it cou-ld be-e?" Paul managed with great effort to call in answer; but he was too busily occupied in keep-

ing his seat to say more when his question went unanswered.

Out on the country road the way was clear. How the big car did go then! Phil Way was watching every dip and curve of the roadway like a hawk. He grasped the wheel with steady hands and drove guardedly, but at such a pace!

On through the shade of the tree-skirted road! On with care and watchfulness with a zip and jolt over the railroad tracks! On and on over the smooth stretch of highway and at far too dangerous speed down the slope to the Lake! Skidding deeply in the soft earth, the car swung into the hotel drive and in another moment came to a halt before the porch. At the same instant Dave MacLester discovered Pete Whaley making frantic signals from the farthest end of the back lawn.

"There's Pete, now!" he said. "Run down where he is, Phil!"

The clutch sought its place again and in another five seconds the friendly darkey was telling the three excited boys why they had been

so strangely summoned. Quickly Pete related what he had seen and heard, and told his reason for being anxious to cause no disturbance among the hotel guests and the campers.

"Well, you're the candy kid, all right! You for me!" warmly exclaimed Paul Jones, whose language was apt to be none too free from slang in time of excitement. "They're a fine young bunch!" The latter expression obviously had reference to the three cousins.

Though Paul was not deeply impressed by the possible gravity of the harm which might have befallen Billy Worth, Phil and Dave fully realized that if Pete's suppositions were correct their chum was in serious danger. Paul's opinion was that nothing worse than taunting and impudence would be directed at Billy. The others saw far greater mischief afoot. Thanking the colored boy hastily, all three set off on a run up the hill and through the woods of the north shore.

So long as they could follow the path the rescue party had no trouble in knowing quite con-

fidently the way they should go. In the unbroken woods, however, they were quite at a loss to shape their course. Fortunately they decided to follow the shore line, as indicated by the brighter light shining among the trees to their left, and so hastened forward.

The murmur of violent tones in the distance soon guided the three wondering and excited boys and rapidly but cautiously they approached the place whence the sounds issued.

So occupied with their hateful determination to make Billy Worth sign the written apology were the members of the Star Lake club, they did not hear the approach of their unhappy victim's friends. Like a sudden cyclone the latter came down upon them. Dave MacLester's right fist took Martin Waldo off his feet and his left sent the ugly Sagger sprawling. Phil Way's swift drive on Jay Waldo's ribs made that young gentleman feel and look more homesick than a small dog tied tightly to a tin can.

"Look after Billy, Paul! Phil and I will give

these tin horns all they want and then some!" cried Dave. "A fine lot of parasites!"

But Paul Jones, disappointed that he had not had a hand in the first attack, owing to his having been just a step in the rear, was otherwise occupied. Like some dread avenger he stood over the prostrate form of the burly Sagger, ordering him to get up and give him (Paul) a chance at him.

"I'll give you a punch that'll put you to sleep, you bully! Get up! Why don't you get up and let me take a fall out of you, you big toad?"

Phil Way it was who at once abandoned the excitement of the fight to give Billy Worth the attention he much needed. In a hurry he cut the strap binding the captive's feet, and helped him to arise. He drew his handkerchief, also, to wipe the blood from Billy's face. Just as he did so, Jay Waldo, recovering at last from his surprise and the vigorous jarring his ribs had received, sprang toward him.

Phil's back was turned and he might have re-

ceived an ugly blow but for Worth's quickness. Like a flash the latter sent both fists hard under Jay's chin and the vain Mr. Waldo pitched backward as if a small charge of dynamite had gone off under him. He lay just as he fell, feigning insensibility. Nor did he move until a rather severe and, to tell the truth, unwarranted and mean kick from Paul Jones made him yell in pain and terror.

Dave MacLester meanwhile had dragged both Pitt Sagger and Martin Waldo to their feet. In the most urgent of tones he had invited and requested them again and again to "come on." But they wouldn't come. With a slap on Sagger's left cheek which made that youth stagger like a drunken man, he next turned his attention to Martin. The latter, however, with the wild cry, "Let me alone, you big lobster!" fled into the brush and did not return.

The whole affray, though requiring much time for the telling, occupied less than a minute. Paul had kicked Jay Waldo only once when Phil bade him desist. Sagger quickly followed Mar-

tin Waldo into the woods and was soon out of sight. Undoubtedly the humbled, crestfallen Jay would have done the same but, fighting mad as he was, he feared to rise.

When the excitement had thus subsided, it was found that Billy Worth, though not seriously hurt, was weak and exhausted by the rough experience through which he had passed. Tenderly as a sister Phil helped him to dress, then led him by way of a deep, narrow gully,—a water-course in time of wet weather—to the margin of the Lake. Here, with Dave and Paul standing guard, on the bluff above, the blood was washed from Billy's face and the cooling water dashed freely upon his neck and arms.

Much refreshed, but still showing many signs of harsh treatment, the unflinching Mr. Worth now proposed that they all four go in search of the scattered membership of the Star Lake club.

Phil put a damper on this suggestion, however, instantly. "We'll have plenty of time to even up the score with those chaps," he said,

confidently, "even if we don't count what they've already had as part of it."

Paul Jones rather liked Billy's proposal and said so, but Dave agreed with Phil perfectly for once, and the two carried the point.

It was better so. Nothing could have been gained by pursuing the three plotting cowards further. Their punishment would scarcely have been greater had they been whipped again. A higher power than the four friends possessed, too, was hastening the Star Lake club rapidly toward its just reward. A terrible retribution the Auto Boys could not foresee was on the way. Swift and swifter was it bearing down on the three cousins from Westerfield.

Slowly the four friends made their way through the woods, and took to the path leading out and down to the well-kept lawns about the hotel. As they came near the edge of the woods their attention was attracted to two men sitting on a fallen log and engaged in what seemed a rather violent conversation.

No word that was spoken did the boys hear

sufficiently well to know what was said, and they were passing on, at a distance of a dozen yards, before the men discovered that they were observed. As of one accord they rose and walked away, placing themselves farther and farther from the path. One, the Auto Boys noticed, was a tall, heavy man of perhaps fifty years. He was dressed in an outing suit of bright material and looked to be a prosperous, yet rather gay business man.

It was the other of the two, however, who attracted more particular attention. He was of middle age, as indicated by a drooping moustache fast turning gray. His slouch hat was pulled low over his forehead. His general attire was that of one who had not been fortunate in life's journey, or, if so, improvident.

"I declare, if there isn't 'Uncle!'" exclaimed Dave MacLester. "The one in the blue and gray suit. Hope he enjoys the society of his sweet nephews!"

"It's the other man that caught my eye," said Phil Way, pondering. "I've seen him before,

and not long ago. Maybe he came out in the car with me one day, but I don't think so. I've seen that funny way he has of looking back over one shoulder, then the other. I've seen that slouch hat, too."

"By jolly! So've I!" exclaimed Billy Worth.

"Oh, Billy, you ain't supposed to see anything. How can you with both peepers half shut?" laughed Phil.

CHAPTER XVII

A FRUITLESS SEARCH

Their friend, the colored lad of many names, the Auto Boys found waiting for them back of the hotel. First he was greatly concerned to see Billy Worth looking so badly used, but his sorrow changed to the gayest laughter as he learned what happened when the rescue party arrived.

"Ah's jes be'n achin' fur somebody to leahn dem brats sech a mighty good lesson!" he exclaimed. "Ah has to stan' fur a lot of dere impidence, an' it jes' does do me mo' good to heah tell how dey did git what's be'n so long comin' to 'em!"

That the four friends thanked Mr. Peter Whaley and offered him every possible sort of reward within their power, it is really needless to say. But Pete wanted nothing—would have

nothing, and insisted that the knowledge that the Star Lake club had received a drubbing was all the satisfaction he wanted. He gloried in the part he had played in the affray, by having called up Mr. Wilder, but was equally anxious that no word of it be whispered anywhere.

Here, then, was another reason for saying nothing at the hotel and but little elsewhere concerning the cowardly assault upon Billy and the fight which followed. That Mr. Brush would send the Star Lake club away in a hurry, if he knew what had taken place, there could be no doubt. That the cousins were liable to serve punishment under the law if their cowardly assault were reported to the authorities was equally apparent.

But the Auto Boys were content to let the matter drop without a word of complaint, rather than annoy the comfort-loving proprietor of the Brush hotel, or attach any unpleasant publicity to Star Lake as a quiet and high-class resort. Thus, before parting with the honest, loyal Pete, it was agreed by all that if the story of

the afternoon's adventure were made public the Star Lake club must tell it. And considering the ending of the affair, it did not appear highly probable that those three worthies would want to discuss the subject very extensively.

In Mr. Knight's big runabout Paul and Billy soon left for town. Phil and Dave remained to drive the Thirty home at the regular time of leaving the Lake, and incidentally to watch for the return of the routed membership of the Star Lake organization. They did not expect further trouble from that source, but deemed it prudent to be on guard.

As the two boys lingered near the automobile shed they saw the tall, gayly dressed man whom they took to be Mr. Sagger, uncle of the cousins, come strolling across the back lawn and pass on to the hotel. That the less prosperous looking individual, who had also been seen in the woods, was not with him attracted their notice. They gave the matter little thought at the time, though they did think of it a great deal later on.

Time for leaving the Lake came and the three cousins had not put in an appearance. Pete Whaley said he would watch for them and satisfy his own and his friends' curiosity as to their general bearing. That he did this may be mentioned right here.

From a rear window the young darkey gleefully saw the three youths sneak across the lawn and into the hotel just at dusk. They were a long time preparing themselves for dinner and a meeting with their uncle. Later he saw them on the wide veranda looking mean and sulky, out of sorts with themselves and with each other. Pete could hardly keep down his laughter until he reached the kitchen. There he broke into a perfect roar, and for a half-hour showed himself so mightily tickled that the chef at last indignantly drove him out.

Their colored friend's merriment and its cause made a good story for the Auto Boys when he saw them again, but, meanwhile, certain developments in their affairs had for the

time taken their minds to other subjects entirely.

The morning after the little battle on the bluff of the north shore Phil Way chanced to find a letter, addressed to himself, in the family library. At the same moment he heard Billy Worth's familiar whistle and, seizing the letter and his hat, ran out to where the latter waited beneath the elms.

Billy looked and felt little the worse for the previous day's adventure after a night's sound sleep, but thoughts of vengeance were in his mind. What he might not have proposed would be hard to say, had not Phil's letter given him fresh subjects to ponder over. Slowly Way poked a lead pencil under the flap of the envelope as he and Billy talked. With the same careless indifference he drew out and unfolded the written sheet within. Then his eyes opened wide and, "What's this? Listen here, Billy!" he exclaimed.

Very attentively, indeed, Billy did listen, looking over Phil's shoulder and following every

line and word of Con Cecil's extraordinary warning.

"By George! that crazy Cecil will go to the asylum over this Binski case yet," said Phil Way, finishing the letter. "Now how did he ever find out that we were there that Saturday night, do you suppose?"

"Jimminy Christmas, that ain't the worst of it!" Billy Worth ejaculated forcibly. "The cops are going to get after us, Phil! There's no end of trouble ahead. I guess we could show 'em that we didn't kill Binski and don't know who did, but whew! don't you see what Cecil's afraid of? He thinks maybe we couldn't. And I—Great land of lemon squeezers! do you suppose Con Cecil himself thinks we *did* rob the huckster?"

It was with reluctance that Phil Way, after much talk, accepted Billy's interpretation of the reporter's letter. He did agree, at last, that the matter was serious, but still held the question open in his mind until he should hear what Dave MacLester and Paul Jones might say.

Dave had made the trip to the Lake that morning and Paul was taking his turn on Mrs. Chase's lawn. With utmost impatience for a general council regarding the letter, Phil and Billy went to help Paul finish up his work, that the three of them might meet the car when Dave returned to the park entrance. This they did.

The Thirty rolled up ten minutes late, owing to a broken fan belt. However, it was but a short time until the three passengers had alighted and the four owners of the machine were gliding along the shadiest of the park drives.

"What's on your minds? Star Lake club looking for more trouble?" demanded Dave, noticing that Phil and Billy did not talk as much as usual. It was no new thing for the four to meet at the gateway of the park for a run in the car upon its return to town, but the quiet prevailing this time was by no means customary.

"Shut her down here in the shade. We've

got something to talk about, Dave," Phil answered, and the car came to halt almost at once and without a jar.

Paul had been told the contents of the letter but he—indeed, all three—listened eagerly as Phil Way read softly aloud. No response came from Dave, as expected. Paul remarked that the police would have been after them long ago, if they thought the anonymous card amounted to anything. Still Dave was silent.

"Gosh-all-hemlock! Mac, can't you say anything?" Billy exclaimed, at last, considerably nettled by the other's silence.

"Sure, I can! I can say that we'll all be arrested and that somebody'll appear to swear that we killed Binski," retorted Dave soberly. "Who wrote that card? That's the party who will try to swear the robbery onto us. That's the party who really does know who killed the huckster. So much is plain as A B C. Fine lot of stuff for the newspapers! I can see the headlines already: 'Auto Boys Pinched—Young Ruffians Who Killed Huckster Binski in the

Toils.' And what are you going to do about it? I knew blamed well things were coming our way too fine to last!"

"If we only knew who wrote that card!" Phil Way reflected aloud.

"Thunder! You don't suppose it was the same fellow who put that money in our box in the woods, do you?" asked Paul, doubtfully.

"Let's see that letter! Who remembers what the writing in that note left in the money box was like?" came in haste and excitement from Billy. Paul's question had given him a new thought.

The theory growing at once out of Billy's suggestion appealed to all four boys forcibly. Again the words, "Don't blab it," rang in their ears. Again they saw themselves counting the money, so strangely returned to their treasure chest, on that very Sunday before Binski was found unconscious. They saw again, in their thoughts, the written message left for them go sailing off in a gentle breeze into the valley.

Try as they would, not one of the four chums

could say positively that the writing traced from the post-card by Con Cecil was not like that they had found with the money in the woods. Neither could they say that it was the same or similar.

"We'll go to the Ravine this very afternoon. We'll try to find that note," announced Phil Way with determination.

To agree to this was easy all around but what further should be done was a problem. The boys did not doubt that there was almost certain to be a call from the police to learn all about their presence at the huckster's place at about the time he was assaulted. That they were likely to be charged with the murder seemed altogether probable—at least, to Dave.

Billy was alarmed, also, concerning the prospect of serious difficulty, but more hopeful. Phil was calm and ready to face what came when it did come. He still inclined to the belief that Con Cecil was unnecessarily excited and worried over the whole Binski matter.

Paul Jones alone refused to feel the gravity

of the situation. "Oh, the police are a bunch of dubs! Con Cecil's crazy as a bed-bug and —Well, I don't care, it's a measly shame to pester us with all this business when we haven't time to bother!" he declared in his own peculiar style—a style that showed itself most prominently when he spoke with emphasis.

An unlimited discussion failed to change the situation the boys faced. The only result was that in four homes there were excuses made that noon for being late for dinner. Undoubtedly, every excuse was different from every other one, and none, it is safe to say, was fully and completely the real reason for tardiness.

Never before had the boys been so greatly tempted to omit one of the scheduled trips to the Lake as they were that afternoon. The one thing they wanted to do was search Gleason's Ravine for the bit of paper they had permitted the wind to carry off on that memorable Sunday. Impatient and anxious, the Lake trip, never neglected yet, they found for once a bugbear and a burden.

"Hurry back, Mac! We'll meet you at the park," cried Billy Worth, as the Thirty left the little garage, driven for the first time by unwilling hands; and David answered, "You for me," in a way that gave emphatic assent.

In fact, a strict interpretation of young Mr. MacLester's expression, as he meant it, would be that he did fully intend to make all possible haste, and that he would be counting fully upon seeing Billy, Phil and Paul at the meeting place designated. Perhaps it did not matter that the actual words he spoke no more signified this than they meant, "Eggs are thirty cents a dozen." But he was understood, even though good English was butchered, hung and quartered.

Although the boys fully realized that to search for the lost note after so much time had passed would certainly result in failure, they lost no time in getting to the Ravine immediately when Dave returned from Star Lake with the car. As on a former trip to Gleason's in the machine, one of the lads,—this time Billy—

remained in the auto at the roadside while the others were absent.

Hastening through the woods, the three crossed the silent, lonely valley and eagerly clambered up the opposite hillside to the Retreat.

"It was just from here," said Paul, "that that note went sailing off," and he indicated the place by standing upon the identical spot, as he remembered it.

"Stay right where you are, then, Paul," Phil commanded, "and you and Dave call out to me when I get down to about the place where the paper fell, as nearly as you can remember it. Seems to me that with all the brush and branches on the ground it could not have been blown very far, once it settled down."

Phil's experiment was of no avail, however, and his hopes were unrewarded. Paul and Dave were not able to indicate satisfactorily even the approximate alighting place of the bit of paper and when, one after another, and then all together, they had sought in vain to find that

mysterious message, they were obliged to pronounce it a fruitless task.

The undergrowth of the valley made the search all the more hopeless, for in the weeks since the note was found, the grass, weeds and every tiny shrub and plant had been shooting rapidly upward and putting forth fresh sprouts and additional foliage. The same condition existed along the hillside and about the cave or hut, save where the earth was tramped hard, directly before the door of the Retreat. But while this growth on all sides served to prevent the making of one discovery, it was the means of bringing about another which proved to be important and interesting.

As the boys gave over the search for the lost note, their attention turned to the treasure box, still hidden, though empty now, beneath the boulder near by.

"Let's have a look, just for fun," proposed Phil, and led the way to the great stone.

"Say! Somebody's been here!" exclaimed Paul Jones, suddenly. "Somebody's been here,

sure! See, they have almost worn a path right up to the big rock."

It was true. While the undergrowth was not dense enough to cover the ground completely, the fact that the wild vegetation had been tramped upon repeatedly was plainly noticeable.

"Maybe they've been leaving some more cash for us!" suggested Dave. "The old rock is just what the path leads to," he went on, his voice rising with excitement, as he pushed ahead to the boulder.

"Now wait, Dave! Let's see whatever signs there are that anyone has been getting into the money box. Lot of sense they must think we have to leave any cash here again!"

With careful scrutiny the boys examined the approach to the treasure chest's hiding-place. They believed they found evidence that the small stone covering the hole under the larger rock had been removed and replaced, but could not be certain. Notwithstanding, they drew the

roughly-made casket forth and with great curiosity opened it.

"Fudge! I could have told you there was nothing in it," said Dave MacLester, with characteristic dejection.

"Oh, nobody said anything about there being money in the box but you, you Chinaman!" Paul Jones fired back.

Phil laughed. He had expected nothing and was not disappointed. He was, however, a great deal puzzled to know why that path had been made to the big boulder. That it did lead to the rock, and not beyond it, was very clear. And since this was its terminus, where was its beginning? That was a question worth looking into and Phil called attention to the fact.

The search which followed revealed but little. The undergrowth was tramped from the door of the Retreat to the rock. There was no sign of a path approaching the cave from any other direction. Only one solution of the puzzle, then, could there be. The person or persons who had visited the spot had climbed down the bare and

rocky ledge stretching up at either side of the half-cave, half-cabin.

Up this ledge all three boys went clambering. The land on the higher level was dotted with brush and trees for some distance back from the edge of the valley. Beyond, there was an old and almost barren pasture, bordered by a corn-field. No distinct trace of a path could the lads find. The earth was dry and the grass and other low vegetation of the open woods too tough to be easily broken down by passing foot-steps.

Yet one sign that some one had lately been in the neighborhood was found. Tucked almost out of sight beneath an old, decaying log was a thumb-marked and dirty copy of an old news-paper—The Lannington Tribune. It contained under great, black headlines the story of the robbery of Michael Binski and the finding of the huckster unconscious. The paper bore the ap-pearance of having been read again and again.

CHAPTER XVIII

HELPING TYLER GLEASON

Anxious and not a little worried as they were by the contents of Mr. Cecil's letter, the newspaper found above the Retreat was not a pleasant discovery for the Auto Boys to make. Somehow, it seemed to shout at them the very thing about which they least wished to hear, and that was the tragedy of the lonely road. Somehow, the soiled and worn pages of print seemed to bring the whole terrible story directly to their door and seek to fasten it there.

"Nothing but an old newspaper and it might be *any* newspaper and *any* date," said Phil Way quietly, yet just a little nervously. "It is only a coincidence that the paper is just the one it happens to be."

"Well, I wish Binski had run and jumped off the earth before ever we did a stroke of work

for him," Paul Jones growled, savagely. "I hate this botheration like forty, plague take it!"

Dave made no comment on the situation. He saw only trouble, and maybe very serious trouble ahead and concluded that for once he would not anticipate it by predicting its coming.

None the wiser for their work, so far as the warning from Mr. Cecil and the anonymous card the police had received were concerned, the three boys returned to the broad highway and Billy Worth in waiting for them. The latter had not been altogether idle in their absence but, on the contrary was able to tell of an interesting talk he had had with Tyler Gleason.

The owner of the Ravine had driven by on his way home from town while Billy was waiting at the roadside. Glad to see one of his young friends again, he stopped his team.

"D'ye think that autymobile would do to draw wood in next winter?" the farmer asked, smilingly, when greetings had been exchanged. "Because," he went on, more seriously, "I'm thinking my man Neely won't be here 'g'in the

time comes. Can't make him out, lately. Last time I saw ye he was actin' queer, as I told ye. Been worse, if anything, since. Now an' ag'in he'll work like all get out; then he'll get down in the mouth an' ain't worth shucks. Wish't I could get you boys to help me some. Here the hayin' is on an' grass jes' spoilin'. Neely ain't no better'n half a man. I'd have let him go, an' found somebody else, but that he's owin' me. Kept always askin' for money till at last blamed if I didn't find he'd drawed about the hull summer's wages. Don't see what he done with it."

Billy Worth said he would try to arrange for helping the farmer with his work for a few days, at least, as an accommodation, if nothing more. "But," said he, "maybe we wouldn't be worth much, except to pull weeds, or something like that."

"You leave that to me," Mr. Gleason answered. "Dan Dilworth looks after some business for me now an' ag'in, an' if what he says

is right, you four boys, or any one of ye, will be worth as much as so many men, any day."

This compliment from the eccentric old lawyer pleased Billy very much. It pleased Phil and Paul also, and even Dave MacLester smiled and said, "First time anyone ever heard of Dan Dilworth tossing bouquets around!"

Tyler Gleason's increased need of help on the farm and his continued dissatisfaction with Duck Neely afforded one subject for conversation as the Auto Boys drove slowly back to the city. It was fortunate that a fresh topic had arisen just at this time, too, for the letter from Con Cecil was not a pleasant one. The warning note, the path leading to the big stone, the newspaper above the Retreat and the whole horrible story of the lonely little house on the neglected road, could not be entirely avoided, however.

Even when none of these things were mentioned, there remained with the boys a constant and unpleasant sense of unrest. In the background of their thoughts the consciousness of

the trouble threatening was always present. Their usually buoyant feelings could not but feel the weight of their anxiety. The storm clouds hung over them very heavily now and to the farthest depth of their oppressive shadows the only ray of light which shone was the certain knowledge of their innocence. No matter what might be charged against them,—regardless of the circumstantial evidence which might connect them with the Binski tragedy,—they knew they were in no way guilty.

That part of Con Cecil's letter, in which he suggested to Phil that Dr. Way be informed of the card the police had, and what might come of it, was discussed at some length. The decision the boys reached, however, was to say nothing to anyone until it was found necessary. If the worst came, then fathers and mothers would have to know everything. There would be no escaping the unpleasant publicity, no manner of saving relatives and friends from sharing in the disgrace, and the distasteful notoriety, accompanying their being taken into custody.

On the other hand, if the authorities paid little attention to the card, or only sought to find the writer, believing that that person must know something of the robbery, the remote connection of the Auto Boys with the mystery might never be made public. The fact that they had, innocently enough, even carried to the scene of the tragedy the very club with which the police said the assault was committed, would not be told—would never embarrass their fathers, mothers, sisters or friends, or cause any one humiliation.

Not all at one time did the four friends arrive at the conclusions which have been stated. They talked the whole matter over at various intervals. It was Sunday afternoon, in the shade of the old elms, that their final judgment was agreed upon.

At the same time and place, also, a decision was reached to lend a hand to Tyler Gleason. By taking turn about, the auto service would not be interfered with. The regular work in town could be continued, while placing at Mr. Glea-

son's disposal at the same time two pairs of feet and hands and strong young arms.

Enough of novelty entered into the boys' plan for helping the farmer to make the prospect interesting. This fact, coupled with the stern necessity of earning more money than was now coming in, to pay the debt on their automobile, made the opportunity Tyler Gleason offered a very welcome one. Perhaps if the Auto Boys could have foreseen the outcome of their undertaking, they would have been much less at ease, as they discussed it, if not less eager to begin.

The plan to help with the work on Gleason's farm had for its most pleasant feature a rapid drive in the Thirty each night and morning. Paul, for instance, would take Phil and Billy to the country very early and return with the machine in time to make the regular trip to the Lake. In the evening, after the car had returned from the scheduled afternoon run, and the day's work was done, Paul and Dave would drive to Gleason's to carry the two young farmhands home. Next day the car would be in

Billy's charge or Phil's, and so on,—providing, always, that two of the four should be at the farm while the others were taking care of the company's regular business.

Very well pleased, indeed, was Tyler Gleason when, coming from the barn on Monday morning, a bucket of milk in each hand, he saw an automobile turn swiftly into his drive and two lads in broad-brimmed straw hats spring out. "Who sent for farm-hands?" they cried cheerily.

Very little formality was observed in starting Phil and Billy to work. Mr. Gleason expressed his pleasure in seeing them, and was more than glad to learn he could count on having two of the four active young fellows to help him every day for a week or two at least. But when Phil said they were ready to begin at any time, the farmer replied quickly: "Sure pop! There's hoes on the fence there; ye might tackle the weeds in the garden potato patch till I get the chores done up."

Duck Neely passed and re-passed the garden

where the boys were at work. They called "Hello," upon first seeing him, but he answered only with a nod. Presently he was seen driving with a mower to the field back of the barn and the merry clink of the machinery soon told that he was at work there. In a short time Tyler Gleason had another team hitched to a hay wagon and invited Phil and Billy to hop on and help haul in hay, already cut and cured.

It was not easy work. The sun was glaring and the breeze so slight that perspiration started from every pore, as the two boys pitched the dry hay up to the farmer on the wagon. It was no easier to stow away the sweet-smelling but heavy, tangled mass in the depths of the big mow in the barn. With many a joke and laugh, and keen relish of the thought that Paul and Dave would find out what it was like next day, however, the lads noticed the time passing quickly and not unpleasantly.

After dinner Phil and Billy found Duck Neely smoking his pipe in the grateful shade of an old apple tree. He had nothing to say at

the common table, where all sat down to the noon-day meal, and the boys resolved to find out why he was so unlike his former self. For Neely was pretty good-natured, ordinarily. Short and heavy, with a very round, red face which, though it indicated no great extent of intellect, certainly had nothing bad about it, he was rated a strong, willing worker, and honest and reliable. Long years before his peculiar waddling gait had earned for him the nickname by which he was always addressed.

"Brace up, Duck; you're as grouchy as a chauffeur with a flat tire!" said Billy, and he and Phil dropped down on the ground beside the hired man.

"Never you mind *me,*" said Mr. Neely, and that was all he did say.

"Pretty day," observed Phil, with a sly wink at Billy.

Mr. Neely made no response.

"Duck Neely," burst out Billy Worth, after a minute or two of steadfast silence on part of all, "Duck Neely, if you are sore about any-

thing, spit it out! Let's know what it is. If you aren't, rouse up! Be sociable! Don't be such a blamed porcupine!"

For perhaps a half minute Mr. Neely still continued silent, smoking his big, black pipe meditatively.

"Let me tell you fellows something," said the hired man at last. "If you knowed what I know, an' if ye was as scared for your very life as I be, you'd get sullen and sulky too, I bet, an' I wouldn't blame ye nuther. So jest shet up. I ain't got no kick comin' 'gainst any you boys an' I don't owe you nothin', nuther. Jest let me *be,* that's what *I* say. Don't butt in! Good many people do that an' are sorry for it afterwards. So'd you be, too! Let me be an' if ye think there's any danger of yer rememberin' that I spoke a bloomin' word, furget it!"

"Oh, we don't want to butt in, Duck, or meddle in your affairs at all," Phil answered. "Simple size of it is, that you never were so glum before, and Bill and I just thought we'd jolly you up a little."

"Cut it out," was the gloomy, sulky response. "Ye can't do me no good unless ye can lend a me a hundr'd dollars, or any part of it, an' I happen to know that you can't."

"Wish we could, Duck," responded Billy Worth, hopefully, and then he sang a little tune to some such words as "Sorry I ain't got it, you could have it if I had it."

"That's me! By gosh, that's me! 'All in, down an' out,' for sure," growled the hired man, but he laughed, though harshly, too, as he picked himself up and went to get his horses to return to work.

The afternoon seemed unusually long to the two amateur farm-hands, for Tyler Gleason believed in making hay while the sun shone, both literally and figuratively. With every trip to the barn, however, the boys had the opportunity to drink their fill of the most delicious, pure spring water from the well, iced ginger water prepared by Mrs. Gleason, or fine, fresh buttermilk from the springhouse. Their exertions

made these simple beverages a most delightful treat.

At six o'clock all hands were called to supper, and though Phil and Billy had distinguished themselves by the magnitude of their appetites at noon, they added fresh lustre to their fame at the evening meal.

Mrs. Gleason was a small, busybody sort of an old lady but kind as could be. The extraordinary capacity the two boys showed for dried beef, new potatoes in cream and bread and butter and coffee of which fare the supper principally consisted, really amazed the good soul; but to supply the lads to their utmost limit was her particular delight, nevertheless. Smiling, and in the best of good humors, she saw that they wanted for nothing which the simple menu could supply.

Weary, but happy, their faces flushed by the day's labor, the Binski case and all the uneasiness it caused for the time forgotten, Phil and Billy walked out to the yard when supper was over, just as Dave and Paul came up in the car.

Smoothly, easily, the Thirty flew into the drive and came softly to a halt at the Gleason door.

"Fellows, I've got a thought," said Billy Worth, suddenly, when greetings had been exchanged. "I tell you I have a *thought!*" he exclaimed with emphasis.

"Shucks! That's nothing, I've got a *blister,*" said Phil Way, tenderly rubbing the inner edge of his right thumb.

"Tell you what we'll do," Billy went on, refusing to heed Phil's comment. "We'll take Mr. and Mrs. Gleason for a ride in the machine. They've never been in an auto in their lives!"

A favorable response was unanimous from the other lads. In the early twilight, a half-hour later, when Mr. Gleason had, with active young helpers, finished his chores; and Mrs. Gleason, with help from the same source—be it said to the everlasting credit of the Auto Boys—had finished washing the supper dishes, the good farmer and his wife were carried away over the fine roads in the most comfortable manner imaginable.

The heat had gone from the day, and the cooling breeze, as the Thirty rushed swiftly forward, coupled with the fine sensation of rapid motion, was a luxury the two had never known before. Needless to say the Auto Boys would be welcome at the Gleason farm whenever they passed that way, forever afterward. Not merely because of the auto ride the husband and wife enjoyed; no, not by a hundred-year margin; but because of the thoughtfulness and courtesy which prompted the invitation, and the helpful hands which contributed to make its acceptance possible.

Duck Neely resolutely declined to be a party to the outing. He sat gloomily on the porch with Paul and Dave while the others were absent. Not a word save monosyllabic answers to questions could the boys draw from him and soon they gave him no further attention.

Moody and silent, Neely still sat as before, when the car returned. His position was unchanged even when the four chums called goodnight to all, and the Thirty, fresh and ready al-

ways, sped away down the drive, onto the broad, white road and to the city merrily.

"My! Are you here at last?" exclaimed Phil Way's mother, as the car glided gently into the little garage. "Someone has telephoned three times, asking for you, Phil, or for any of the boys. There are two men at Knight & Wilder's, who insist that they must go to Star Lake to-night, and that no one else can take them. I don't like it; I don't like it a bit! And how tired you must all be!"

CHAPTER XIX

A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

With many gentle assurances that it was not late, and that neither he nor any of the boys were very tired, Phil dismissed his mother's anxiety. She returned to the house feeling very secure in the reflection that four other such thoroughly good, trustworthy boys could not be found anywhere.

Maybe so; but what mother would not think the same?

The fact is, and there can be no doubt about it, that any boy who cannot be honestly considered by his mother to be one of the best boys in the world, is not as truthful, as honest, as clean inside and out, or as reliable and decent as he ought to be, by a very wide margin. Mothers, so charitable, so eager to overlook a thousand faults and shortcomings! What a

pity for any chap to fail to be at least as honorable and square and downright honest and good as to win his mother's praise!

"You and Paul skip along and get to bed, Dave. You'll be up against something to-morrow, eh, Billy?" said Phil with one of his quiet laughs. "We two will take those men to the Lake and be all the better for the ride."

The suggestion met with approval all around. In two minutes the car was under motion again, and in scarcely a greater space of time came to a stop before Knight & Wilder's establishment. Directly there came a young man accompanied by another, much older, from a patch of darkness outside the big open doors of the garage, and a low but familiar voice:

"Who is it? Phil Way?"

"Well, hello here, Con Cecil!" exclaimed the one addressed, and Billy echoed the greeting.

"No—no! Don't call me by name. Not a word, mind you, to anybody about this trip either," said Mr. Cecil in an undertone. He shook hands with the two friends and climbed

"Not a word, mind you, to anybody about this trip."

into the tonneau. The stranger with him followed and Billy closed the door.

"Now don't go fast. Don't do anything to attract any special attention," Con Cecil said in the same low undertone. "Take us to Star Lake just as you would any other passengers. We'll get out at the door and you drive your car on to the shed you use. Be ready to bring us back again when I send for you. There'll be no sign of mystery or anything unusual. The only thing is to act natural and pretend you don't know me. Gee, this is going to be hot stuff! I'll tell you all about it, sometime," whispered the reporter with suppressed excitement.

"Say, we want to talk to *you* about something, too," exclaimed Billy Worth as the car started.

"Sure you *do!*" Cecil answered significantly, "but not now. I'm on the job of my life! It will be off my hands mighty soon, though, and then I'm going to give you Auto Boys some quiet tips. I haven't forgotten you, you bet!"

Gently as a bird flies, and at whatever speed desired, the auto purred through the city's streets and on along the familiar road to the Lake. What a well behaved car it was! As if its engine and its very tires understood and appreciated the loving care bestowed upon every portion of the machine, the Thirty responded always to every touch upon its devices; rarely missing, seldom developing trouble in any way, and never, thus far, to any serious extent.

Quietly as a bird, too, the car stopped at the porch of the Brush hotel. Con Cecil and the stranger alighted and without a word went within. As the rays of the porch lights fell upon the elder man, Phil and Billy noticed that he was a much sun-burned, rather angular person of sixty years or more. His dress seemed to indicate a prosperous mechanic—a master carpenter or other out-of-doors worker, perhaps, the lads agreed.

They were waiting beside the car under the trees at the foot of the drive. From a boat

on the water near by there came, from time to time, fragments of song. The voices of the Star Lake club were easily recognized.

"I — stood — on — the — bridge — at — mid — night." The words and the old, familiar air came floating in from the boat. It was Jay Waldo's voice.

"Pity somebody didn't push him off!" exclaimed Billy Worth with contempt.

The jest struck Phil Way in some very risible spot and he laughed immoderately. Quickly it became evident that those on the water recognized the source of the laughter and that they immediately imagined it a shaft aimed at Jay's vocal efforts.

"Haw, haw, haw!" came the coarse, mocking tones of Pitt Sagger. "You better go soak your *own* head."

Pitt had made a mess of it, as he always did when trying to say something smart, and Billy joined loudly in Phil's laughter.

Angry retorts came from the boat off shore, accompanied by threats of "punched heads"

and "broken necks," but, strange as it may appear, neither Phil nor Billy were seriously alarmed. Remembering Con Cecil's injunction to attract no particular attention while on this trip, however, they refrained from acknowledging the compliments hurled at them.

Receiving no response, the three cousins contented themselves by yelling "Coward" and "Where's yer sand?" a few times. They made no move to run close in shore, apparently, for presently the sound of their voices died out in the distance.

Soon afterward came Pete Whaley to say that the gentlemen who had come in the car were ready to return.

Quickly and quietly the Thirty drew up before the brightly lighted porch again and with easy indifference Con Cecil swung himself into the tonneau. The stranger followed, but in a fussy, fidgety way that seemed to suggest some particular uneasiness. Phil Way closed the door after the stranger had fumbled with it unsuccessfully, sprang up to his seat beside Billy at

the wheel, and the car moved swiftly away. There came an audible chuckle from the rear seat. "It's working our way fine," said Con Cecil, as if to himself.

As the auto reached the city Mr. Cecil requested that he and his friend be allowed to get out at the park entrance. The car was stopped there, accordingly, and the two men alighted.

"Stroll on ahead, Uncle Silas. I must talk with the boys a minute," the reporter suggested. Without a word the stranger did as requested. He seemed a most remarkably taciturn fellow. Not more than once had the lads heard his voice and then only in some low remark to Con Cecil.

"I've been in Westerfield most of the time since I saw you last," the newspaper man continued, when the three were alone. "I know from the remark Billy made that you got my letter, though. Have you seen or heard anything further?"

"Say, Con, look here, do you think—"

"Can't tell," Mr. Cecil interrupted hurriedly, guessing at the question Phil was trying to ask and guessing wrong. "Can't tell anything about it. They may treat that card as just a joke. They may be terribly close to you this minute."

"But we—" Billy Worth tried to get a word in here but he, too, was interrupted.

"No, listen," the reporter went on rapidly. "I've got to catch that next Westerfield train before anyone knows I'm here. I want you to hear this, though. Keep mum. I honestly believe the police have dropped the Binski business entirely. There's other fish for them to fry, and the joke of it is, I'm going to fry the particular fish in question myself. Now, I'll be here again in a couple of days or so, and will get some information for you. Until then, in heaven's name, keep your mouths shut tight. So so-long, or I'll miss that train."

Like a shot Cecil was gone. Had he been less absorbed with other matters, he must surely have noticed that the two boys were more inter-

ested in telling him something than in receiving any information he could give them. But while he still believed, undoubtedly, that his friends stood liable to arrest for a terrible crime, he considered them in no immediate danger, and meanwhile he was exceedingly occupied with, to him, a most important and pressing matter.

What mystery was the young reporter trying to solve now? What manner of news could it be that took him to Star Lake, and what connection had the stranger with it all? A dozen such questions did Phil Way and Billy Worth propound to each other on their homeward way. The strange features of this night trip appealed to their romantic imaginations very strongly, and they discussed them at length.

But the boys wished they had been able to learn just what connection Con Cecil supposed them to have had with the assault upon the huckster. Evidently he was pretty serious when he admonished them to keep tight lips. However, neither of the two subjects was in any manner disposed of when the Thirty made

the floor of the little garage creak, and the chums bade each other good-night.

Tired? So tired he just managed to get into bed before falling asleep, Phil Way soon forgot the long, busy day's experiences. Tired? So tired he just could not have "wiggled another step," he solemnly assured himself, Billy Worth covered the distance between the green and yellow garage and his own home.

A very few minutes and he too was slumbering. It is a good, old-fashioned word. Paul Jones would have said "pounding his ear." His meaning would have been the same. Either way, and in any event, the fact remains that Billy Worth was, for the time, "the world forgetting and by the world forgot," absolutely and completely.

* * * * * * *

It is a pretty good sign of very active interest in some enterprise or undertaking when a lively young fellow of fifteen or so, possessed of perfectly normal inclinations, rolls out of bed and jumps into his clothes a little after sunrise

without so much as being called. When four such lads do this, and all on the same morning, it might be called, in some cases, almost a miracle. It was nothing of the sort, however, with Phil Way, Billy Worth, Dave MacLester and Paul Jones.

No, indeed! The business training the four friends had gained in their various enterprises had taught them the necessity of being up and doing. Often times, no doubt, it was with inward protests that they cut short their morning naps; but once up, their lively interest in the joint undertakings on hand made them glad to have done so.

Just at this time, however, stern conditions were making themselves felt. The note for four hundred dollars, given in the purchase of the automobile, would be falling due at the end of September. It would require an extra effort to meet it. Met it must be. To have their dearly loved car taken from them—to suffer such humiliation and face their friends again,—were thoughts too unpleasant to contemplate. There

was only one alternative. All hands must join in adding to the slowly growing bank account of the transportation company. The earnings of the Young American Contract Company, too, must be applied to the same fund.

But on the other hand, it was pleasant, anyway, to be up and out in the air and sunshine in the freshness of the morning. Particularly pleasant was it to go for a rapid ride thus early in the day. The streets and country roads were quite free of other conveyances. The speed limits seemed naturally to relax somewhat under these circumstances and invite a vigorous attack without a threat of possibly unpleasant consequences.

So it was when the chums drove out this morning to Gleason's farm. Dave and Paul were eager to try their hands at helping with the harvest. Phil and Billy, being human, and human boys at that, were quite as eager that they should. They had had their experience the day before. While they did not regret it, and would be ready for the work again on the

day following, there was something really pleasant and mirth-provoking in the contemplation of the toil and heat and perspiration that their companions must endure. Strange that human nature should always enjoy such things!

Tyler Gleason hurried out to meet the Auto Boys as the Thirty, with a loud blast of the horn, turned into the drive.

"My, but it's a relief to see ye!" he exclaimed. "I don't know what I'd ever do! Duck Neely has vamoosed. Gone, hide and hair, and owin' me close to forty dollars! Never went to bed last night at all! Left him settin' on the stoop jest as he was when you boys started home, an' me an' my wife went to bed, an' that's the last we seen of him. But I've been expectin' it—I've been expectin' it! An' you boys help me through hayin' and we'll be all right yet."

CHAPTER XX

"BAWLED OUT FOR FAIR

Although some time had passed, and the Star Lake club had made no apparent effort to retaliate for the drubbing received at the hands of the Auto Boys, it must not be supposed that the incident was forgotten. Lacking in many things the club undoubtedly was, but spite, vengeful feelings and capacity for mischief were not among them.

A great variety of plans for revenge had the cousins discussed but without finding any which seemed severe enough upon the Auto Boys and safe enough for themselves. A serious warning their uncle had given them, about this time, too, against attracting any unnecessary notice to themselves or him, was an obstacle in the path of their spite and hatred. Whatever they did must be quite in secret. Their wits, feeble

enough in some ways, but usually strong for mischief-making, were taxed to the utmost.

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, a way to bring humiliation and suffering upon the four chums they so vigorously hated opened itself to the trio of highly moral and self-respecting cousins. It happened that Martin Waldo and Pitt Sagger had gone to their room in the hotel for a nap one afternoon, and, though lying down, were still wide awake, when, through the open door connecting with the room their uncle occupied, they heard him and some second person enter.

"Keep still," whispered Martin. "Let's hear what's going on." Pitt nodded assent and they listened.

As their uncle and the person with him talked in low tones, the latter's voice the two boys recognized as that of a Mr. Rydick. This man, Mr. Sagger had told them, was employed by him to search for signs of oil and gas in different localities. As his explorations were of the

most secret nature, his connection with their uncle the lads were never to notice or mention.

True, the cousins had taken Mr. Rydick in the car to one point and another, at different times, but his investigations were always concealed by some pretense of being bent upon other errands. Some times he even traveled in disguise. In all cases the boys had strict instructions to ask no questions and to carry no tales. Naturally any or all of them were eager to hear—or overhear—whatever might reveal their relative's connection with the rich discoveries the stranger might be making.

"The reason I insisted on coming here, even after you had told me not to," Mr. Rydick said, when the two men had entered Mr. Sagger's room, "is this letter."

Pitt and Martin did not know what their uncle read, but they heard him say, presently: "Gone, has he? Well, what of it?"

"Why, it means that there's nothin' doin' on the Gleason premises, for one thing, but it means more'n that, too. I'm afraid he knows

too much. I hate to think that he ain't where I can watch him,—at any rate, know where he is and what he's at."

"Yes; that's so," came the response in a guarded tone. "What else?"

"I don't know but that is all of that; but there's another thing. The boys who run that auto between here and Lannington are working for Gleason—some of them, anyway. They are the ones that were at the Binski place the Saturday night he was touched. It won't do for me to prospect on the Gleason place when there are too many around."

"Let's see," said the uncle, in the same low tones both men used, but with some sarcasm in his voice,—"Let's see! The police received a card suggesting that they would do well to find the boys who were seen there, at about that time, didn't they? Evidently they haven't done much about it."

"No, they ain't."

"Rather slow, aren't they? But what do I care about that huckster affair? Nothing. So

don't mention it again; now mind that. This very polite party, who sends you a letter saying he can be of no further use to you, I possibly am interested in. I see nothing for it but that you will have to give up the work on Mr. Gleason's very likely looking farm. In the meantime don't *you* do any more writing. Of all the fool performances ever coming within my observation, I think that of yours was the worst. And this friend of yours,—let me know at once if you hear from him again. In the meantime forget the Gleason place. It will keep. Try a new field. If you see a likely chance for gas or oil in some other locality, I may be interested."

"Just as you say," Mr. Rydick answered.

His voice, as compared to that of their uncle, even the two listening boys noticed was cautious, even timid. It always had been so. But as his work was of a secret nature, its character would naturally be reflected in his manner. On the other hand, their uncle's voice was masterful and commanding. Even in the low

tones he used to-day he seemed to show superiority and to demand obedience.

When the two men had left Mr. Sagger's room, which, after some further conversation, they did, Martin Waldo sat upright on his bed and tried literally to hug himself.

"Pitt Sagger!" he exclaimed, gleefully, "I'm a wonder."

This very modest declaration caused young Mr. Sagger to sit up, as if to obtain a better view of so remarkable a creature. "Huh?" said he, in his slow way.

"I say I'm a cracker-jack for bully plans," the exuberant Martin answered. "You heard what Rydick said about these four dubs that run that automobile! They were seen around that huckster's place the night he was soaked. I never knew that before! Maybe we won't bawl 'em out for fair, eh? That's my scheme. How does it listen?"

"'Hi, there, we know something about you, all right!' we'll yell at 'em," Pitt suggested, with his coarse laugh, his stupid eyes brighten-

ing somewhat as he slowly comprehended Martin's plan.

"Oh, you lunk-head!" the latter exclaimed savagely. Then with sarcasm, "'We know something about you, all right!' You talk like a fish! You get the idea, all right, but you go at it like a kindergarten! We'll yell, 'Who knows who hit Binski?' or something like that."

As the young gentleman addressed was quite accustomed to such delicate compliments as were, in this instance, bestowed upon him, he gave them no heed, but laughed loudly, thinking of the embarrassment the Auto Boys would suffer.

Jay Waldo was found at once and made acquainted with what had been overheard and Martin's plan to make this knowledge available. To the latter's surprise, Jay seemed more interested in hearing every portion of the conversation between their uncle and Mr. Rydick than in the proposed "bawling out" of the Auto Boys.

Some fairly intelligent people, it is possible,

might have been at a loss to know of just what "bawling out," and especially "bawling out for fair," consisted; but Jay appeared to have no difficulty on that score. What he did want to know, however, was who had written the letter which Mr. Rydick was so anxious their uncle should see and why the communication was considered important.

No information on these subjects could Pitt or Martin give. They—and Jay, too, for that matter—were used to hearing their uncle talk in a mysterious way. Often he had told other men, particularly Mr. Rydick, what to do and what not to do. To his nephews he never spoke of his affairs, save to tell them that a lawyer and business man necessarily had the confidence of many kinds of people, and they—the boys—should never ask questions or open their lips to anyone concerning even his coming or his going.

The consequence was that, to Pitt and Martin, at least, the only particularly interesting portion of the conversation overheard was that

concerning the chums they so keenly desired to injure.

Whether Jay Waldo knew more, or suspected more, than his cousins, that he was more curious than they regarding the information Mr. Rydick brought, is a question. Being more alert and generally attentive to things going on about him than either of the others, he possibly had opinions regarding some transactions which he did not reveal. Be that as it may, his judgment of the scheme Martin broached was adverse.

"You've been told often enough to keep from attracting a lot of notice," he said. "Now you want to do that very thing! Suppose somebody asks you how *you* know those sardines were at that Binski place! That's just what would happen the first time you bawled 'em out."

"Shoot it! It must be plenty of people know it, or how would Rydick get to hear of it?" demanded Martin, not at all pleased to have his very happy thought rejected.

"Shut up!" retorted Jay. He was irritated

by his cousin's manner, and his style of conversation was not overwhelmingly polite at any time. "Rydick knows enough things that ain't public property," he went on. "Uncle John, too! So you close your trap."

"I would like to bawl 'em out," Pitt persisted. "We could get somebody else to do it," he suggested.

Strange as it may appear, this proposal met with general approval. The boys could see no harm coming to themselves by such a plan, and even their uncle would not know of their connection with it. Jay, who alone fully realized the secret nature of all communications between Mr. Rydick and their uncle, hastily concluded that, so long as the proposed hint at the Auto Boys' connection with the Binski affair did not emanate from himself or his cousins, no one for whom he cared would be the wiser.

"Tell Sam Carew. He will get 'em bawled out in town," was Jay's suggestion. "We can just happen to be around and hear it, if we want to. Anyhow, it will be better than to have it

happen out here, especially if Uncle John should find it out," said he.

The plan was quickly perfected. The scheme of revenge which was to hasten their own humiliation and disgrace the Star Lake club members put into work at once. In ten minutes their uncle's gray car was carrying them to Lannington, and a meeting with Sam arranged by telephone.

The plotting cousins picked up their ally near his home and as the gray car rumbled along the South boulevard, well in the outskirts, where there would be few to see and none to hear, they made known their wishes. Very careful were the three not to tell Sam the source of their information that the Auto Boys had been seen near Binski's place.

"You don't s'pose that's where they got their money to buy that car, do you?" young Carew inquired, interestedly.

"Like as not; but you can't tell and couldn't prove it," Jay replied, cautiously. "The only thing we want to do is just have 'em hooted.

Let 'em be bawled out for fair! In two days every kid in town will be yelling it at them."

Somehow, the proposal did not meet with a very favorable response on Sam's part. In a vague way he comprehended the serious nature of this indirect attack on the Auto Boys' good names. On the other hand, however, he was jealous, and spiteful, and, above all, too great a coward to refuse what was asked.

"I'll have some kids at work when their old ice-wagon leaves for Star Lake tomorrow afternoon," Carew agreed, at last, and the cousins voted him so good a fellow then and there that poor Sam, drinking in every word of their rank flattery, longed for more. Thus stimulated, he talked at length of the wealth and importance of his uncle in Chicago.

That more or less imaginary individual, by the way, had never yet sent on the automobile, the coming of which Sam had hundreds of times announced. He really should have been ashamed of himself.

Faithful to his agreement, vile though it was,

Sam Carew was ready the following afternoon with a half dozen street arabs when the Auto Boys' car appeared at the park entrance. From a safe distance, back among the shrubbery skirting the drive, he sent the smaller boys, in single file, walking down the gravel road past the waiting car. One after another, as they passed, they cried, "Who knows who hit Binski?" And then in chorus, "Don't you wish you had an automobile?"

On the opposite side of the street, pretending to be much attracted by the display in a store window, were the three members of the Star Lake club. With fiendish delight they saw success crown, for the time, their nefarious plot.

Phil Way and Paul Jones were in the car as it waited. As if struck a sudden blow from behind, Phil started and looked quickly about when the words of the gamins fell upon his ears. Paul did not for a second grasp the import of the cries. When he did, he colored violently.

"Oh, Phil, will we be pinched?" he whispered, in a startled way.

Phil did not answer. He noticed that a number of passersby had heard the urchins yelling out, and were looking questioningly around. But his eyes rested on three figures across the street—the cousins, whose exulting glances had not escaped his quick inspection. "Very well. We know where *that* comes from," he said.

"What's this they're yelling at you?" inquired a stranger, who stepped up the next moment, presenting a round trip ticket for the Lake.

"Some foolishness or other," Phil responded as calmly as he could; but his heart was thumping like the Thirty's motor with the muffler off.

Paul jumped down to make room for the passenger beside Phil at the wheel. Then his eyes, also, fell upon the Star Lake cousins, and he understood the words Way had just spoken. "Shall I skip over and smash 'em?" he asked, eagerly, all in a tremble with anger.

"Not on your life! There's something back of this. Get the papers carried and meet me the minute I drive into town," was the quiet

but resolute answer. "We can be out to Gleason's by supper time to get Billy and Dave."

And now the six urchins came back across the street and into the park again. As before, each cried, "Who knows who hit Binski?" and then in chorus, "Don't you wish you had an automobile?"

Until the last of the little ragamuffins had passed by, Phil sat boldly upright as if he did not hear. Not a muscle did he move. When they were gone he started the car gently and slowly. He would not have shown undue haste, would not have had the appearance of wanting to escape the taunting voices, for the best town lot in Lannington.

One there was who heard the gamins' cries who stopped at once and closely noted all that happened—Jim Wells, of the Tribune staff. "Queer," thought he. "What has occasioned that, I wonder!" Then he went on to his desk in the hot, stuffy newspaper office. At the first opportunity he told the city editor about the incident.

"The very story Con Cecil fell down on!" exclaimed Mr. Abels, emphatically. "Chase after those brats and find out what they know. You'd have done it without being told if you'd been on the job!"

CHAPTER XXI

DARK CLOUDS ON THE AUTO BOYS' HORIZON

The three cousins were not to be seen when, after watching the departure of the Thirty, Paul crossed over the street. This was fortunate, perhaps, for so very hostile were young Mr. Jones' feelings that trouble of some sort would hardly have been averted had he come upon them.

Paul loitered about the neighborhood of the park, excited and impatient. If by chance he saw a policeman, as happened once or twice, he was frightened beyond measure. Surely, he thought, he and Phil and Billy and Dave would be arrested now. Though they could prove their innocence, they would have to bear the disgrace of being locked up and the mortification of appearing in court, while Sam Carew,

Freddy Perth and many others gloatingly looked on.

It was a relief when the time came to deliver the papers. The work, to a large extent, took the troubled boy's thoughts away from the subject of his worry. It also seemed to hasten the coming of Phil and the auto. That he would feel much more comfortable when he had company, Paul was certain. He could not easily be brave and confident alone. Who can, indeed?

Phil Way was doing some very earnest thinking as the Thirty hastened on to the Lake. While he awaited the time of returning, also, and on the way back to the city, was he thus occupied. "How could the Star Lake club have learned of the visit to Binski's place at that most unfortunate time?" was the substance of the question which, in one form and another, he asked himself again and again.

If Paul Jones welcomed the sight of company in his troubled thoughts, as he met Phil at the park, the latter did no less. To share the common alarm, also, with Dave and Billy and

take counsel together was now their immediate purpose and no time was lost.

Paul stopped at his sister's long enough to say he would not be home until dark, and to leave a similar message the car came to a halt at the Way residence. As he passed through the hall, after telling his mother that he and Jones were going to Gleason's and would have supper there, if they were so fortunate as to be asked, Phil was handed a letter by the maid. He slipped it into his pocket to read on the road and, presently, the auto was on the broad highway leading out past the Ravine.

Paul was at the wheel. Leaning back luxuriously in the seat beside him, very comfortable in body, if not in mind, Phil took out his letter. "Must be from Con Cecil," said he, noting the address and postmark. He spoke no further word till he had read the message through. Then with enforced calmness, though his voice trembled, he said: "Paul, we've got to face the music. Don't get rattled or scared, but the fact is, we will probably be arrested for that

Binski murder. It's likely to come any minute."

"If - I - ever - get - another - smash - at - that - Star Lake - bunch," said Paul Jones, with slow deliberation, "I'll - fix - their - clocks - so - tight - they'll - never - know - *what hit 'em.*"

By which somewhat mixed figure, it should be understood, Paul meant to convey the thought that punishment swift and severe would be the portion of the three cousins; and not that he had any intention of engaging in the repair of timepieces.

"That won't do any good," Phil answered soberly. "Listen to Cecil's letter," and he read:

"Dear Phil and All The Rest,—I get it straight that the cops are to nab you four almost any minute. For heaven's sake, talk it all over with your folks and—skip. Get away separately and quick as you can. There's no one to push the case very hard and in time it will blow over. My tip comes from a party who is right on the trail. Good-bye, boys. Keep

your nerve. Though I may never see you again, I am always your friend,

Cecil."

"The strangest part of it is," Phil Way went on, "Con Cecil actually believes we killed the huckster. I've suspected it before. Now I know it, and I'd like some one to tell me where he got the crazy notion into his head. Sure, when it comes to the pinch, we haven't any thing to worry over, but it's—all-fired unpleasant," he finished protestingly.

Billy and Dave were just washing up for supper, after a busy day in the hay field, when the familiar "honk-honk" of the auto caused them to look up. The horn brought Mrs. Gleason to the door, also, and the car had scarcely stopped when she pleasantly called out, "You're just in time! Warm biscuits and honey and plenty for all. Come right in, both of you!"

The evening meal in the cool, old farmhouse passed pleasantly. The conversation was largely about the disappearance of Duck Neely, and the prospect that he would soon return, and

it was not until on the homeward way that Dave and Billy were told of the day's unhappy developments.

Dave MacLester became exceedingly despondent at once. He dreaded the ordeal that must be met, not only on his own account, but because of the embarrassment and trouble it would mean at home. Billy Worth felt scarcely less uncomfortable for the same reasons, as did also Phil and Paul, but he was not the one to throw up his hands and abandon himself to misfortune.

"There's somebody besides that cousin outfit that knows how we happened along at Binski's place," young Worth declared, thinking hard. "And who else is it so likely to be but the very parties who hit the old man on the head? They may have been hiding right close by when we were there. Nobody that we know of saw us. How else could those tin horns know anything about it?"

Just as Phil Way, alone, had all afternoon debated the very questions Billy asked, so did

all the boys discuss them now. And they agreed that the Star Lake cousins must in some way know very much more about the robbery of the huckster than they knew themselves.

"We ought to have gone to the police in the very beginning and told them everything we could," said Dave at last, blue and unhappy.

"We talked that all over at the time. We concluded we didn't need to. No use to fret now about what might have been," responded Phil Way, with sound philosophy. "It's worse than crossing bridges before you come to 'em."

"That's what I say, by thunder!" ejaculated Paul. His courage and confidence were fine when Phil and Billy were with him.

Fearing almost to find a blue-coat and brass buttons confronting them at their own little garage, the lads drove up to the green and yellow shed, basking so peacefully in the calm moonlight. As there was no one there, their courage revived rapidly. They renewed an agreement, made on the road, that for another night and day they would still say nothing of

their slight knowledge of the crime Fate seemed to try to fasten on them, and with this they separated.

If Fate itself were busy, trying to lay at the door of the Auto Boys responsibility for the huckster's death through circumstantial evidence connecting them with that tragedy, then Fate had strong assistance. For Mr. Abels was on the trail. Or, to use his own vigorous expression, the city editor was "on the job."

Mr. Abels had remembered that reward of one thousand dollars, offered by the county authorities when the whole community was stirred and incensed by the attack on the inoffensive and defenseless huckster. The reward still awaited a claimant. With the information Jim Wells had that day obtained as a clue, the city editor planned to win the prize money and do some extraordinary work for his paper at the same time.

There was no doubt in the mind of Mr. Abels now, that, had Con Cecil done his work properly, the mystery of which, thus far, only the

huckster's old white horse knew the secret, would have been cleared up long ago. He recalled perfectly the chain of evidence the young reporter had gathered. He needed little more, he thought, for even the street gamins had heard, apparently, who the lone man's assailants were. He only feared, that, since the identity of the robbers had now become such public property, he might be too late to make the first formal accusation against the four boys.

Jim Wells had been unable to find the youngsters whose taunting cries he had heard, when sent to do so, but this did not reduce Mr. Abels' ardor in any way. He was rather glad, indeed, for the fact enabled him to tell Wells to let the matter drop. He meant to have that thousand dollars for himself alone.

About the time that Phil and Paul were starting in the auto for Gleason's farm, Mr. Abels was at Knight & Wilder's garage. He strolled in casually and as casually engaged Mr. Knight in conversation. Without exciting suspicion by

appearing too much interested, he learned by degrees all he cared to know about the purchase of the Auto Boys' car. Then he frankly asked if Mr. Knight knew where the youths obtained their money.

"No, I don't," was the answer. "I have been a little curious myself. They had been working and saving and they had some cash in the bank, but some of that they brought to me they had had buried somewhere, I'll swear. Some gold pieces showed it plain as could be. They're live ones though! Fine boys, all of them!"

Just as Con Cecil had done on another occasion, Mr. Abels seized upon the statement that the Auto Boys had obtained money from a mysterious source as being most important evidence. It convinced him of their guilt. He wanted no better wedge to pry from the guilty culprits a complete confession.

Going further into the case that evening and the day following, the city editor of the Tribune found, or believed he found, many damaging facts against the chums he so relentlessly pur-

sued. True, he found, also, much good concerning them, but the latter was not grist for *his* mill. He had no feeling of animosity against the boys, it must be remembered; he bore them no ill will in any way; but he had set out with the conviction in his own mind that the four youths had committed a grave crime and he meant to prove it. Evidence unfavorable to his theory he neither wanted nor considered.

The last bit of testimony Mr. Abels felt needful, he obtained on the second afternoon of his search. It was the post-card received by the police some time before. In confidence the blue-coated captain exhibited the anonymous communication as the newspaper man just happened, apparently, to mention the Binski case. With some hesitation the officer confessed that his staff had been unable to discover whence the card came or to whom it referred.

Whereupon Mr. Abels frankly stated that he was looking up some matters in connection with the unsolved mystery. He did not, however, state how very important he considered the

postal to be, no matter from whom it came. Instead, he coolly slipped the card into his pocket, saying he wished to examine it with a magnifying glass. An ordinary reporter would not have been permitted to do this. When his superior in the army of news-gatherers did so, no objection was made.

Without going into the details of the chain of evidence Mr. Abels had pieced together, let it suffice to say that he was satisfied. The thing which most annoyed him was that he could not account for the fact that even little newsies and other small boys of the street had been, in effect, accusing the Auto Boys of robbing the huckster. Where did they get *their* information? And yet the certainty that these youngsters seemed to have their own well-founded suspicion, had its weight in persuading the city editor that his own discoveries were infallible.

With cool deliberation, alone in the Tribune editorial rooms that evening, Mr. Abels filled in a blank affidavit, solemnly charging that four certain persons, then and there being, namely,

to wit: Philip Way, William Worth, David MacLester and Paul Jones had, feloniously, unlawfully, and for purposes of robbery, struck and beaten Michael Binski with a certain weapon, namely, to wit, a hickory club, inflicting wounds which caused the death of the aforesaid Michael Binski, etc., etc.

This paper the city editor put safely away in one of the smaller drawers of his desk. In the morning he would present it to the police. Simultaneously there would appear upon the streets an extra edition of the Tribune with the story of the complete solution of the mysterious assault and robbery.

Having prepared the affidavit to back up the news to be printed in the extra, Mr. Abels, with much care to bring out effectively each sensational detail, wrote his account of the robbery and the story of the purchase of an automobile with the stolen money. The whole horrible affair, just as he imagined it all to have occurred, was pictured at length.

When his writing was finished Mr. Abels

started slowly homeward, smoking a cigar and with pleasant visions of a thousand dollars. Though the rain fell and the wind blew, though he was tired and soon was wet, as well, he was extremely well satisfied with himself. If his plan worked out, the Auto Boys would be placed under arrest about eight o'clock next morning. By that time all that he had written would be in type. Long before any other paper could learn what was going on, newsies would be crying the Tribune extra, with full particulars, in every part of the business district.

So does every man live more or less in a little world of his own. He knows and sees all that is going on in his small sphere, and maybe is often pleased, astonished, terrified or amused by what takes place. Still, if he could know and see, as easily, all that is happening all about him, but yet outside his own narrow circle, the chances are that he would be more often and more greatly astonished; more often and more greatly terrified; and, perhaps, more often and more deeply amused or pleased, as the case might be.

Mr. Abels would have been very greatly astonished, indeed, had he known what was taking place almost under his very eyes while he completed his chain of evidence; while he wrote his story; while he prepared to claim the reward for the arrest of the lone huckster's assailants; while he walked slowly homeward through the rain so complacently and so exceedingly well satisfied with himself.

CHAPTER XXII

A DISCOVERY AT THE OLD HUT

A saying trite but true is, "Bad news travels fast." Within an hour after the jeering cries of the little street arabs had been directed at the Auto Boys, the report was quietly gaining circulation that the four friends were suspected of the assault on Michael Binski.

No details were mentioned. They would come later, as, like a ball of snow rolled upon the ground, the rumor grew. Like the ball of snow, also, the first report was a slight affair. Someone had merely heard the jeering taunts of the six small boys set on by Sam Carew. By the time this had been half a dozen times repeated, it amounted to the definite statement that the Auto Boys purchased their car with stolen money—Binski's money.

But none of these rumors had come to the

ears of any relative or near friend of the chums up to the morning following the conference on the way home from Gleason's. The four lads met, as their custom of late had been, at the little garage under the elms. Phil and Billy were to go to help Tyler Gleason today. Dave and Paul would take care of passengers to and from Star Lake.

Frequent changes of work was one of the rules Phil Way had promulgated for the Young American Contract Company. It was his idea, also, that where two worked together, the same members of the little company should not be coupled up for more than a day or two at a time. So were jealousies or other possible friction prevented.

Feeling much more cheerful in the brightness of the early morning, and much more inclined to disregard the danger which, only the preceding evening, seemed so near, the friends made the run out to Gleason's right merrily. Only one plan, having in view the possibility that all four might be under arrest ere night,

did they make. This was that after returning from the morning trip to the Lake, Paul and Dave should drive out to Gleason's for a talk during the noon hour. Any news bearing upon the trouble threatening could thus be considered in general counsel.

The haying on Tyler Gleason's farm, thanks to the willing hands that helped him, was practically finished. One small field of heavy timothy only remained to be cut. Hither Mr. Gleason went with the mowing machine this morning. The grass would not be sufficiently cured for raking until afternoon, so Phil and Billy were set to hoeing corn. They rather liked the change of work, and cut away at the many weeds vigorously. But the rows were long and the sun was hot.

"Take two apiece clear across, this time," said Billy, after they had once worked the length of the field and back, "then we will rest a bit in the shade at the lower end of the lot."

Boy fashion, Billy easily persuaded himself that the hoeing of the two rows at a time fully

justified a little relaxation when they were finished.

"If it's a good thing to take two at a time now, it's a good thing to take two every time," said Phil Way, refusing to make a bargain with his conscience. "I don't care, though, if we do rest a little. Reckon we'll get just as much done in the end."

The foot of the cornfield bordered the woods above the Ravine. The Retreat of the Forest Rangers was not far away, for the hut stood on that side of the valley nearest the waving green blades.

"Might skip over and have a look, for just half a minute," proposed Billy Worth. The lads had been talking of the Retreat while they worked. As together they found seats on the old rail fence at the lower end of the field, the suggestion was offered. It would be an interesting way of spending the breathing spell the two had so unanimously voted themselves.

"What's the use though?" responded Phil. "We'd only get to talking about that money we

lost, then more than found again, and a lot of other business that we agreed, a little while ago, not to mention any more till noon."

"No, we won't. Come on," the other urged and, liking the suggestion very well himself, Phil yielded and both boys ran through the woods together. They soon came upon an old pathway of the cattle, which led directly to the top of the bluff above the hillside cave or hut,—it was hardly the one thing nor yet the other, it will be remembered—and soon the two came to the identical log beneath which the old newspaper had been found some time before.

By this landmark Phil recognized the location of the Retreat, here hidden from view, except if one looked very closely, and down the steep descent he went. Billy rapidly followed him.

"Looks as if there had been somebody here again," said Phil, noting how the grass and the undergrowth had been trampled.

"I'd like to know who in creation it is that's prowling around so much," ejaculated Billy Worth with indignation.

Phil took the key from its resting place under a little stone on a ledge of the roughly constructed wall, and opened the padlock that secured the door.

"If they aren't monkeying with any of our stuff, I suppose we can't complain," he said, "and I guess they are not, at that," he added, stepping inside. "Here are the axes, the saw, the cups and pans, and there's Dave's boxing-gloves! He ought not to have left them here!"

"And here's the wash-basin full of dirty water!" exclaimed Billy vigorously.

"None of our bunch ever left that there. We've always thrown out the water and turned the basin up to keep from rusting. You know we have, Phil!"

"Yes, somebody's been here," Phil answered, indifferently taking the boxing-gloves down from the rough mantel above the fire-place. "And here's something else!" he added, in a far livelier tone. "It's a letter!"

"Gee, I hope it ain't from Con Cecil," Billy almost groaned; but he laughed too. "If some-

body's been leaving such things, though, we'll find out who's been poking around here, all right."

"I should hope so! The letter's for us, boy!" replied Phil with pretended superiority.

"Great Scott! It *ain't* from Cecil, is it?" Billy cried, in real seriousness this time.

"Guess not. It's one of the envelopes we had here in the winter. All our names are on it," Phil returned with some excitement. "Let's see!" He broke the seal and took out a closely-written, thumb-marked sheet. Together the two boys read the writing:

"I told you not to blab about that money I put in your box under the stone and you done what I said. Maybe you thought it was some of Binski's doe but it wassent. I keep thinking all the time you boys reckoned it was me that held up the huckster but so help me I didn't do it. It was me that took some of your money out of that box, then put it back and some more to it. From up on the bank over the hut I seen you put your money box under the stone but the ree-

son I took some of it was to win more and I done it. The man I got it from was trying to leed me on to get Tyler Gleason to play the same game he played with me and trim him right. I know now that is why he let me win. So I would have come out all right but I thought I could win some more and I tried it with some of them Lannington gamblers that the same man knew. They skun me bad. Then when I would not get Gleason to play the game that had been showed to me the party would get mad and throw out hints that it was me that got Binski's money and he could prove it because of money I had to gamble with in Lannington. But that same party is the one that got Binski's pile himself because he didn't have much money before that and afterward he had a stack, and besides this I seen him going into the woods towards Binskeys that same night. Still he woant let me bee and comes here to your hut and like a big fool I meet him here and he wants me to help trim Gleason by him letting on he wants to leese lands for oil and then play his skin card

game. He skipped out mighty quick the day you boys come out in your auto and over to the hut and was afraid you would see him. If I could get some more money I would let him play the game on me again and win like I did before. I thought you would put some more in the box but you didn't, because I have looked. I can't tell how I have been pestered with that man talking sly about how Binski got it which job he done himself and I know it. You boys have been squaire with me and I wanted you to know who took your money and put it back and that there wassent any of it Binskeys money either befoar I left because I can't stand that man and I have so wrote him. He has got me skared bad when there ain't nothing to be skared of and I am afraid of him. I quit Gleason last night and you boys will have to help him out till he gets somebody. So I will say thank you for the use of your bunk in this hut and the crackers I got. They was purty musty. So good-bye.

Duck Neely."

"By jolly! I know who that man was!" ex-

claimed Billy Worth, and he put his finger impressively on Neely's closely scrawled letter, where the words "that man" occurred.

"Great guns! It was Duck Neely that got into our treasure chest! That's the interesting thing!" cried Phil Way. "The loony, though! He's scared half to death over nothing! And *we* had no kick coming, because of what he got from us! He needn't have been afraid on that account."

"Sure, it's interesting to know that Neely was the one that swiped our coin, but gosh-all-fishhooks, Phil, don't you see now who robbed Binski? That man we saw in the woods when we cut cross-lots to try to collect that money Binski owed us. That's who!"

"Billy Worth, *I* know something," Phil answered impressively and slowly. "The man we saw up on the north bluff at the Lake that day is the same one who was walking off through the woods, back of Binski's, the very Saturday night we went there! I *said* I had seen him before. Now I know where!"

"Yes sir! *I remember,* and I said so, too! That's who it was, all right. Now if he *was* the same man Neely talks about! But that's what we can't be sure of. He might have seen a dozen men that we didn't see!"

"And a sight of good it would do us if we did know," responded Phil soberly. "Every step we take, lately, seems to drag us into that Binski affair. I wish his truck had spoiled before ever we touched it."

For a longer time than Tyler Gleason would have liked, the boys discussed Duck Neely's letter and its remarkable contents. They searched the hut, also, hoping to find some other evidence of the hired man's suspicion concerning the robbery. Nothing could they discover, however, and, suddenly remembering the cornfield, they made double-quick time back to their hoes, and renewed the battle with the weeds, under the scorching sun.

"Just the samey," declared Billy Worth, with a vigorous slash at one tall rag-weed, "it looks mighty queer! If those tin horns at the Lake

knew about our having been at Binski's, as we thought they did the other day, where did they find it out? Why, that man we saw there told them. How would he know anything about it if he didn't know something about the robbery himself? And we know we saw him in the woods that night!'

"Goodness, Bill, you'll be claiming that thousand dollars reward next!" Phil laughingly exclaimed. "But," he added, quite soberly, "reward or no reward, if we could prove all that you have just now said we ought to tell the police, at least. I'd like to talk to Dan Dilworth. If there's anything in the law that *he* don't know, nobody does."

"Blame it all, if we only knew that the man we saw is the man Neely was afraid of, and the one he accuses," was the puzzled response.

With so much to occupy their thoughts, the two boys found the welcome sound of the farmhouse dinner bell in their ears before they expected it. Hungry, and very ready for the noon-day rest they undoubtedly were, but their

greatest interest in the hour at hand was the meeting with Dave and Paul and a discussion of the morning's discovery.

The Thirty rolled smoothly into Mr. Gleason's drive while Billy and Phil were still at the table. Yet they managed to finish dinner without actually swallowing their food whole, though their noticeable haste really caused the kind-hearted Mrs. Gleason quite serious uneasiness. It had been a long time since her own boys were at home.

On a weather-beaten store box, under the apple tree, the Auto Boys talked over Duck Neely's letter, his confession of the theft from the treasure chest and his suspicion concerning the mysterious tragedy.

Paul Jones could scarcely find words to express his astonishment when he heard the news. Dave MacLester, though no less interested, was naturally less demonstrative.

So busy were all with the solution of the mystery of the Forest Ranger money, and the "Don't-blab-it" note, also with the question

whether Tyler Gleason should be told at once of Neely's letter, that for some time nothing was asked or mentioned regarding the morning trip to the Lake. Immediately when the latter subject was brought to notice, however, Paul's ever-ready tongue was started afresh. What he said, too, proved for once to be highly important.

"Peter Kit Carson Washington Jackson Wild Bill Whaley told us something this morning that shows one thing plain enough," said he. "He told us those three Indians wanted him to holler at us, 'How about old Binski?' or something like that. It shows that they put those kids up to yell like they did down by the park yesterday, just as we thought."

"That goes to prove that the man we saw there is the one who was in the woods when we were going to Binski's," said Billy. "He's the one that told them, all right! Who else could it have been?"

"That man—that man! By thunder!" ejaculated Paul, with an earnest, studious frown.

"Why, that's the man who came out of the Ravine, and got into the auto with that Star Lake bunch the day I was waiting up there on the road in our machine! Sure it was! I remember now, just as well!"

"Then that's the man Duck Neely tells about," almost shouted Billy Worth in his excitement. "Don't you know how the letter reads that he skipped out pretty quick one day when we had the car out, and were going over to the hut?"

"I know it's the same man, all right. It's the man we saw up on the bluff," Paul repeated, with excited earnestness.

"Say, this is getting warm," said Phil Way with a smile, yet very seriously too. "We've been playing detectives without knowing it. Now that we do know it, we better play strong."

"Lookin' like rain! We must get part o' that timothy in, anyway, an' the rest bunched up, boys," called Tyler Gleason from the barn.

CHAPTER XXIII

MID WIND AND RAIN

Tyler Gleason's amateur farm-hands responded to his call less willingly than they had ever done before. The desire to follow up the day's developments was keen. Interest in other subjects had fallen far below par. To postpone all action concerning their discoveries, and their suspicion concerning the author of the tragedy at the little, old house on the lonely road, seemed almost too much to yield.

If Phil Way had said the word, all four boys would have jumped into the auto and sped away at once. But Phil said no such thing, and you know him well enough now to look for no such suggestion from him. What he did propose was:

"It sure is going to rain and there's all that timothy out," he said. "Dave, it's your turn

with the papers. Get through early and meet Paul. Get out here in the machine just as soon as you can—both of you. Billy and I will arrange to get away in good season and—Well, we will decide what we better do about everything when we meet again. Come on, Bill. I'll bet you're glad enough to change a hoe for a pitchfork."

"And good old ginger water right off the ice every time we bring a load to the barn!" Billy laughed.

Together he and Phil hastened to help Mr. Gleason hitch the big Percherons to the hay wagon, while Dave and Paul rolled comfortably off to town in that best of friends, the ever ready automobile.

As a weather prophet Mr. Gleason was, on this occasion, a success. Billy Worth said he was a "wonder." Be this as it may, the fact remains that before three o'clock the sky was overcast with thick, black clouds and a heavy downpour seemed ready to begin at any mo-

ment. The wind and rumbling thunder grew louder and louder.

How the two boy farmers worked now! The timothy had all been raked and two large loads hauled to the barn. There would be too little time to draw more before the storm, and all hands turned to the task of cocking up the hay still in the field.

With perspiration streaming down his cheeks, Phil was at one windrow, Billy at another, Mr. Gleason at a third. The boys were racing with each other and against the farmer himself. The old gentleman was quick and strong and made his fork move fast, but he was no match for the younger two. With a glad shout, at last, they turned to help him finish his row, and completed the work just as the first big drops came down.

In one way the coming of the storm was fortunate for Phil and Billy. Mr. Gleason, very glad to have accomplished so much before the rain, asked his wife for an early supper and did all his chores earlier than usual. The boys were free to go the moment the auto arrived,

therefore, and in good season they were speeding over the wet and muddy road to the city.

The rain had ceased for the time but the dense, black clouds showed not a break anywhere. Like the heavy clouds which, in a figurative sense, had been gathering steadily above the heads of the Auto Boys, they gave every sign that the storm was not over.

And the night was coming on dark and threatening. The melancholy murmur of the wind intensified the twilight gloom and, somehow, imparted a feeling of fear and sorrow strangely mingled.

More and more rapidly the shadows deepened. Danger they little saw, and adventure they little suspected lay close before the young friends. And though the early darkness and moaning wind did impress them as with some unknown and dreadful thing impending, they scarcely realized the cause. They only knew their usually buoyant spirits were weighted down as if by some great anxiety they could not name.

"Say what you blame please," remarked Dave MacLester, as the quartette sat talking in the little garage, "men have been actually hanged where there was nothing but circumstantial evidence against 'em, and not as much, at that, as they could make out against us this very night."

The storm, the unusual gloom and a reaction following the excitement of the day's discoveries, had, as has been said, put all the boys in a most drooping mood. The weight of the secret which, foolishly, they had so long borne alone, was telling, too. Adding much to the burden upon their thoughts, also, was a report Paul had heard in the afternoon. "It's all over town that your gang laid old Binski out," a boy had whispered to him. "Another lady at our house told my mother so when they thought I didn't hear."

It was following a discussion of Paul's really alarming report that Dave spoke the words that have been mentioned, in the most unhappy tone imaginable.

"Now, this is never going to do," announced Phil Way, at last. "We're all of us getting like Duck Neely—scared half to death over nothing. Where's all the nerve we had this noon, anyway? Hang it all, we've got almost sure evidence against that man at the Lake if we only knew how to go about making use of it. That's where the trouble is. Let's go and talk with Dan Dilworth. It's better than scaring and worrying all our own folks before there's any call for it."

"Me for you, Phil," cried Paul Jones, brightening instantly, but with a tremor of uneasiness in his tone too.

Then he added a vigorous remark to the effect that it would do no good to masticate any worn-out or discarded bit of cloth or fabric. His words, however, as they certainly could have nothing to do with the subject under discussion, will not need be repeated. Let it suffice to say that he declared a second time that the act of mastication mentioned was of no use whatever;

in which. it would seem, he was very probably right.

To the law office of Mr. Dilworth—for that was where they found the aged attorney to be—the four boys went. By letting Phil serve as spokesman for all, with only such interruptions as the others could not restrain, the lawyer was soon placed in possession of the boys' own knowledge of the assault and robbery and their reasons for suspecting a certain person.

"Well!" exclaimed Mr. Dilworth in his gruff voice, so very gruff on this occasion, indeed, it almost made the boys jump, "I didn't exactly expect this, but I am not greatly surprised. You are sure you would know this man if you saw him again? You are sure your description is actual, nothing imaginary about it?"

As to both these points all four boys answered very positively in the affirmative.

"Is the fellow still at the Lake?"

This question they could not so readily answer, but they thought he was, they said.

"We don't go much on what one may *think* in

the law," said Mr. Dilworth. "Can you find out if he *is* there?"

"Sure!" exclaimed Billy Worth, and, stepping to the telephone, he was soon talking to that loyal friend, Pete Whaley, at the Brush hotel.

"Don't forget to impress that party with the fact that he is not to mention the nature of your inquiry," growled Mr. Dilworth, quite savagely —at least his voice sounded so, little as he really intended it should.

"The man is at the hotel tonight. Pete Whaley won't say a word, you bet," Billy repeated as he hung up the telephone receiver.

"Don't say 'you bet' to me. I don't. But we will pass that for now," was the gruff, old-fashioned lawyer's response. Then opening his office door, he called: "Squire, step over here a minute!"

The squire promptly appeared from his own dim, poorly furnished quarters across the hall. Like Dan Dilworth, he was old-fashioned and had the old-fashioned habit of spending the

early part of every evening at his desk in the old-fashioned building where both had old-fashioned offices. His full name and title were Isaac Golden, Justice of the Peace. He was, perhaps, no older than Mr. Dilworth in years, but he showed his age much more. His figure was thin and his gray beard almost too scant to cover his chin. His hair grew only in a fringe extending from the back of one ear to the back of the other.

"Did you call me, Dan?" the squire inquired in a voice as thin as his own body. His high, sharp notes were in marked contrast to the deep, gruff tones of the lawyer.

"Sit down, squire," said Mr. Dilworth, making no other answer to the question asked. "Here's a case that might just as well start in your court as any other. We want a warrant for the arrest of Robert Rydick on the charge of suspicion. We want your constable and we want him to get the aforesaid Rydick into jail forthwith. Tonight he is at Star Lake. Where he may be tomorrow will depend very largely on how promptly your man can move."

"On suspicion?" squeaked Squire Golden, curiously.

"On suspicion," answered Mr. Dilworth calmly, but still gruffly. "Bob Rydick, card-sharp, thief, and high-grade crook, right-hand man to John Sacker, who will bear watching, is wanted on suspicion."

"Of what?" the justice inquired just a little timidly.

"Murder," growled the old lawyer. "I have considered all along that if the police knew as much about him as I now, they would have had him locked up before this. Now my neighbors, here, come with direct evidence against him. Call Constable Crill, Squire. We must move rapidly, now the machinery is in motion! I said, twenty years ago, when Robert Rydick swindled his only sister out of her share of the little property left them, that his last spark of manhood was gone. His whole career has proved it. He has traveled a hard road, and this is not his first serious offense, though extremely likely to be his last."

Squire Golden made no comment, but telephoned at once for Constable Crill.

"We can take him to the Lake in the car," suggested Billy Worth, referring to the officer.

"And bring that man back with him and us? Goodness no!" exclaimed Phil, shrugging his shoulders.

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Dilworth with such a growl that Paul's cheery exclamation, "Why, cert," faded into a half-choked whisper, and unconsciously he stepped behind his chair.

The details were soon arranged. The boys hurried away to get the auto, and leave word at their homes that they were going on a necessary run to the Lake.

"Phil Way," exclaimed the maid, as that young gentleman stepped into the house, "sure, someone has telephoned for you three times. You are to call Knight & Wilder's garridge right away."

"Shucks!" ejaculated Phil beneath his breath, fearing to find someone wishing to be

taken to the resort. But he called up Knight & Wilder at once.

"Just a minute," said the boy who answered, and very soon there came in guarded tones: "Come down here, Phil, quick as you can. Don't lose a second. You know who's talking?"

"Yes," the lad answered, trembling, for he would have recognized Con Cecil's voice anywhere. Then, "I'll be there in a few minutes," he said.

Paul and Billy were already on hand when Phil reached the shed under the elms, busily preparing the car for work. Both were so excited that everything seemed to go wrong. Phil, scarcely less so, still managed to keep control of himself, and presently down the alley the Thirty went gliding through the mud and darkness.

As pre-arranged, Dave MacLester was picked up at the corner near his home. He was bundled up in a great overcoat, which he promptly took off and stowed out of the way in the car, when the machine had passed beyond the rays of the nearest electric light.

Phil told the news that Cecil was at Knight & Wilder's as soon as all four were together. What could he want? If just to go to the Lake, he could be accommodated only in case he did not care to return at once. If he desired to warn his friends of danger from the police, then they would have something to say, in answer, which might surprise him some.

It chanced that the young newspaper man had in mind exactly the two subjects the Auto Boys discussed. He greeted them pretty soberly. "I've got to go to Star Lake," he said, taking them to one side, "but I couldn't go without first seeing you chaps. You know they're looking for you, don't you?"

"Who?" asked Phil Way.

"A plain-clothes man from the local force is after you this very night, or will be. Are you ready for him, or why is it you have not done as I suggested about going away?" The young man spoke rapidly, but very earnestly.

"Cecil, do you actually think we were the

ones who did up the huckster?" inquired Billy Worth earnestly

"No time for that line of talk, Billy," the reporter answered hurriedly, yet kindly, "but if that is your play, you can count on it that I don't know a thing. Why, the tip I got that caused me to write that last letter came from this same detective! He thought I had found something, sometime back, and came clear to Westerfield to see me."

"Oh, look here, Con, we no more—" began Phil protestingly.

"Of course you didn't! I don't know a thing, never suspected a thing, and I mustn't either. Better not tell me a word more," he continued nervously, "I don't want to know anything. So, to change the subject, I did think I'd ask you to take me out to the Lake—another party and myself. Of course you won't want to now, but you'll be surprised, I reckon, to know what I'm after. We're going to get Sacker, the uncle of those Star Lake club boys. Got him dead to rights on all kinds of crooked business

and a cop is going with me to land him. The whole police force has been looking for him but it's your cousin Dudley who gets him, after all. We're on the way, and here's our car now."

The conversation had taken place just outside Knight & Wilder's establishment. A big touring car came chugging out of the wide doors, with Mr. Wilder at the wheel and an officer, closely buttoned up in a raincoat, in the tonneau.

With a quickly whispered, "Hope you fellows are playing safe, but I'm afraid of it, and—and worried," the reporter stepped aboard and was gone. The rain was falling steadily now and the wind moaned more ominously than before.

CHAPTER XXIV

"THE END OF THE STRING, AT LAST"

"Throw in the high, Phil! Great guns, we've got to get to the Lake as soon as Cecil does, or it'll be too late," said Billy Worth with haste and excitement. "The minute a cop shows up, our man's going to skip. And what do you think of Cecil and a policeman being after 'uncle?' What do you *think* of it?"

Instantly the auto sped forward. The strong probability that an officer's appearance would, indeed, cause the man Dan Dilworth had called Bob Rydick to go into hiding, even though the blue-coat were not in search of him, all the boys realized and they braced themselves for a swift ride through the mud and rain.

Constable Crill was in waiting at the foot of the stairway leading up to Squire Golden's and Mr. Dilworth's offices, and those two men of the law were with him.

In a low, rapid tone Phil told of the car that had gone ahead and the purpose of the reporter and the officer with him. It was the intention, he said, to land the constable at the Brush hotel at the same time the others arrived.

"So Sacker's come to the end of his string at last," said Mr. Dilworth in a low tone. His voice sounded far away, as if he were speaking only to himself. "The end of his string at last," he repeated solemnly. "I told you boys to let his young kinsmen alone. I am glad to know you've done so," he added, as if coming suddenly out of a dream. But now the car was ready.

"I will be waiting for you, Crill," Squire Golden said. "I do think you ought to have help, but if *you* don't—"

Even as he spoke, the Thirty was well under way. Again came the splash of the wheels over the wet streets, again the rush of the damp wind, amidst the slowly falling rain. Wildly exciting was the music in the ears of the Auto Boys.

A youth, holding an umbrella in such a way that he failed to see the glare of the car's lamps, stepped quickly back as the machine sped over the crossing where he was about to pass.

"Sam Carew!" ejaculated Billy to Phil, at the wheel beside him.

"Humph! Phil Way's gang!" commented the young gentleman, who imagined that in another minute he might have been run over. The next instant it dawned upon Sam's mind, also, that there was a fifth passenger in the auto and that that person was none other than Ed Crill, the constable. Sam knew him well and had seen him plainly as the car passed beneath a street lamp, though he had not at once taken notice. That the officer's presence, and the fact that the machine was traveling like the wind toward Star Lake, might signify a great deal, came to the boy's thoughts by degrees. If he reached his conclusion slowly, however, it at least was very definite in the end, and with a sudden emphasis he exclaimed: "They're after the Waldo boys and Pitt Sagger!"

Five minutes later Sam Carew was at a convenient telephone station calling for the Brush hotel, then for Jay Waldo.

"Looks as if they were going to make trouble for you to pay for that 'bawling out,'" said Sam after telling what he had seen. "Likely they're going to have you arrested for speeding or something."

"They'll be good and sorry they ever tackled us before *we're* through with 'em," Jay Waldo answered. Little he thought how soon—oh, how very soon, the bubble of his vanity and arrogance was to be pierced. Little he thought that in his dingy law office old Dan Dilworth sat at that very moment thinking, "The end of his string at last—at last. It never fails. They all come to it."

The rainy night caused most of the guests at the Brush hotel to be in their rooms at an early hour. Pitt Sagger and Martin Waldo were in bed when Jay returned upstairs, whence he had been summoned to the telephone. In a low voice he told the substance of Sam's mes-

sage. There was no doubt in his mind that it was for himself and his cousins that the officer was coming.

"Only thing for it is skiddoo or tell Uncle about it and get him to go our bail," said Jay badly frightened, despite the bravado of the answer he had given Sam.

The latter course was decided on. Martin and Pitt quickly dressed to accompany Jay to the billiard room downstairs where Mr. Sagger was engaged in a game with Landlord Brush. In the hall, however, the three met their uncle on the way to his room. Mr. Rydick, the gas and oil expert, was with him.

In a breath, to have the ordeal over with as quickly as possible, the cousins told him what they had heard and what they expected.

Instead of answering them, Mr. Sagger looked at Mr. Rydick. The latter had turned pale.

"If I could only get to Westerfield on that fast train," he said in a low tone, but with an assumed air of business, to hide his alarm.

"Why do you believe these boys are bringing a constable to arrest you?" inquired Mr. Sagger harshly, turning to Jay Waldo.

"Sam Carew saw them and he thought may be that was what it meant," was the answer.

"Go to your room and stay there, all of you," was the sharp command in reply. "I'll look after this constable myself. If they should send up for you, let them wait."

'It's them four boys' doings. I've been afraid of it ever since that day they saw us back there on the bluff," said Mr. Rydick, hoarsely, when the two men were alone. "Them nephews of yours know a sight too much, too, and they've been blowing it around. I got that straight in Lannington to-day. It was just that that I've been waiting to tell you about."

"Bob Rydick," said the other coldly, "if you would keep your own mouth half as tight as my nephews do theirs, there would be a great improvement over your present methods. I tell you their being here is because it suits me that

they should be. It is the excuse for *my* being here.

"Ordinarily I would not condescend to mention to you a reason for anything I do, but now you know why I intend they shall stay. And mark you this: I'll get you to Lannington at once, and you leave there at once, and if you come back—hear me, Rydick—if you come back, on any pretext whatever, until I send for you, I'll put you where you would have been a score of years ago if I hadn't kept you out. Now, remember! Come! My machine is ready. We will leave the lamps unlit and by careful work can meet that other car along the road and they'll never know it."

Pausing only long enough to get a stormcoat and suitable headgear, John Sacker, alias Sagger, a lawyer in name but a crook, gambler and thief by profession, slipped out of a side door of the Brush hotel, in company with the wretched creature whom he had caused to take the chief risk in all his criminal operations and

whom he held always between himself and the danger of discovery.

The wind and rain and darkness of the night would, Sacker believed, make easy the task of getting Rydick beyond immediate reach. He was by no means certain that the young proprietors of the auto passenger service and the constable coming with them were in search of the man who served him as a cat's paw; but if the danger served to frighten Rydick into staying away from Star Lake, he would do his part to make the latter's scare as complete as possible.

Meanwhile, traveling at good speed along the muddy road, Mr. Wilder with Con Cecil by his side, and the silent officer of the law behind, reached the drive running from the main road to the Brush hotel at Star Lake just as a car, whose lights they had noticed in the rear, came close up to them. Mr. Wilder had slackened speed a great deal, to make the turn, and it was necessary for the machine which followed to put brakes on severely or suffer a collision.

This Phil Way did, for it was the Thirty, with

the Auto Boys and Constable Crill aboard, which had overtaken the first machine. But so suddenly were the brakes applied that the car skidded violently. As it turned almost crosswise of the road, its lamps shed their glare far across the shrubbery-dotted lawn. Plainly revealed against a background of low foliage, amid which it seemed to crouch, was a gray automobile and two men seated in it.

"There they are!" Billy Worth burst forth in loud excitement.

Even as he spoke the gray machine with lamps still unlit leaped forward, made the turn into the roadway with a terrific slide-slip, and started up the hill.

Con Cecil had also seen what the Thirty's lamps revealed, and gave his directions at once. With all possible rapidity Mr. Wilder turned and his car shot past the Thirty almost before Phil had reversed to back onto the main road.

Thus began the race of such dreadful termination. With wheels slipping and spinning, none of the three cars made great speed in

climbing the slope from the Lake. The gray car kept a strong lead over Wilder's machine and the Thirty, with its heavier load, lost ground somewhat on the upward grade. But when the more level road was reached all three sped forward madly

With a splendid response to the accelerator, the Thirty slowly gained on the car ahead. Phil was driving. Above the roar of the wind and the fine, dashing rain still filling the air, he shouted to the constable and his companions: "Watch the roadsides! He will jump and get off in the dark before we know it!"

Of course he was not heard, but it mattered little. There was no danger of the thing he mentioned. To leap from a car going at such a pace would be madness.

"Halt! Halt, or I shoot!" came indistinctly a shout from Wilder's car. It was the officer in the tonneau, standing upright, holding on desperately with his left hand while his right gripped a revolver. "Halt, I say!" came again the harsh cry, barely audible in the terrific rush

of wind and rain, and the swift grinding of the wheels through the mud and water

Whether the fleeing men in the gray machine could hear the warning may well be doubted. Certainly they gave no heed. They were crowding their car to its fullest extent, but gaining very little, if any, upon their pursuers. Then a shot rang out in the rain-filled air, adding to the excitement. As if from far away the sound reached the ears of the boys in the rear car.

It was the officer with Cecil who had fired, but he accomplished nothing. The fugitives' car did not for an instant slacken speed, but on and on through the darkness, with but the outlines of the road to guide the way, plunged madly, furiously forward, and on and on. Keeping always within a little distance of the gray machine Mr. Wilder failed, however, to gain an inch. The Thirty, despite its load, kept well up. Every motor was developing the last ounce of power and speed of which it was capable.

It was as if the race were for life or death. Sacker knew now that Rydick was in danger.

Perhaps he even thought he was not himself quite safe. Hardly would he have risked the chance of accident by such furious driving through the storm and darkness, otherwise. And on and on the gray car plunged, slipping from side to side most dangerously, but speeding on and on, while in swift pursuit came the two that followed.

But on the rushing wind, in the darkness and storm, Death was also riding—riding to an awful victory.

A blinding flash of lightning was followed by a crash of thunder, long and loud; and mingled with the awful sound, that seemed to shake the very earth, came the terrific shriek of a locomotive's whistle. Bearing down upon the crossing, just ahead, was the W. E. & N. Chicago Limited roaring forward at sixty miles an hour.

Did they fail to hear the warning blast, fail to see the swiftly moving, gleaming lights? Or did they hope to make the crossing ahead of the train—a thing their pursuers obviously could not do,—and so gain enough, while the latter

slackened speed, to draw away from them? No one knows.

The awful impact as the mighty locomotive struck the gray car just back of the forward seat, threw the automobile and its occupants into the air as a child might throw a toy. The machine fell fifty feet away, a broken, tangled mass of wood and steel. The two men were found beyond it,—Sacker bleeding and insensible, Rydick still breathing and conscious, but with the mark of death stamped indelibly upon his ghastly pale and pain-drawn features.

In his dingy office, listening to the patter of the rain and the murmur of the wind, sweeping in at his open window, Dan Dilworth said time and again, a tinge of melancholy in his low gruff tones: "The end of his string. John Sacker at the end of his string at last; and Rydick with him."

It was true. As they had sown, so did they reap. To the end of the world the consequence is inevitable.

The rain was still falling when the injured

men were carried, one from Mr. Wilder's car, the other from the Thirty, into the general hospital. But as the Auto Boys left Squire Golden and Mr. Dilworth, after reporting the result of their search for the suspected assailant of Michael Binski, the sky was slowly clearing.

Suddenly there appeared a rift through which the moonlight came in all its wealth of silvery beauty. And even as the clouds, now broken, moved rapidly from view, and the darkness gave place to a calm and tranquil light, so did the storm long threatening the four friends lift and pass over. Alarm and danger were at an end and they were unharmed.

In the very room in the hospital where the humble huckster's life went out, Robert Rydick, confidence man and common crook, confessed himself as the man's murderer. He had not meant to kill he said, but—He obtained comparatively little money for his deed, less than five hundred dollars. When he read how the police had seized upon the hickory stick, which he had seen one of four boys carrying, as

the weapon with which the huckster was struck down, he tried to further the officers' interest in that false clue by sending an anonymous card.

Yet Rydick's confession to the authorship of the Binski tragedy was hardly so important as the numerous confessions in which he involved John Sacker, alias Sagger, now shown to be an even greater criminal than himself. The fleecing of Farmer Spindle, near Westerfield, was but one of many crimes of which the pretended lawyer was the originator, and though Rydick did the principal work, the other received the lion's share of the gains.

Backed by the positive identification of Sacker by the farmer victim, as a result of the visit of Con Cecil to Star Lake, accompanied by Mr. Spindle in disguise, a short time before, the truth of these confessions was fairly established.

A copy of the Westerfield Leader of the morning following the flight of the two criminals

from Star Lake came into the hands of Mr. Abels, city editor of the Lannington Tribune as he sat at an early breakfast the morning after the storm. He was thinking of the sensational news soon to appear in a Tribune extra. It was the occasion of his being astir in advance of his usual time.

But startling headlines on the first page of the Westerfield paper now caught the city editor's eye. It was the story of the crash of the Chicago Limited and the automobile on the Star Lake crossing, the story of the confession of Rydick in the Binski affair, the story of the arrest of John Sacker and of the identification of the supposed lawyer as a criminal of the worst type.

All the news he quickly read. In chagrin and disappointment he saw his own great sensation fade to nothing and his grasp on the Binski reward prove a grasping of the air. But the limit of his endurance was reached when he saw Con Cecil's name signed to the three-column dispatch.

"A little more coffee, sir?" said the waiter, obsequiously.

"No!" thundered Mr. Abels.

For a week Jim Wells and others of his staff feared and trembled and wondered. They guessed, too, the reason of the city editor's irritability, and knew they were not far wrong.

To the Auto Boys one of the strangest features of the developments following that thrilling ride through the rain and storm and its startling ending was the extraordinary astonishment of Con Cecil when told of Rydick's confession concerning the death of the huckster.

The boys had gone home long before the confession was made, but Cecil, staying to the last, to wire every part of the news to his paper, learned of the man's admissions early. Without a moment's loss of time he telephoned to Phil, Billy and Dave in succession, midnight though it was, to offer his congratulations. He tried to reach Paul, too, but there was no telephone at his home.

In Mr. Cecil's mind the certain guilt of the

boys and their consequent danger had been so real that his delight in finding himself only a a victim of a terrible dream, due to his own too active imagination, was truly unlimited. The reward of three hundred dollars for the arrest of Sacker, the swindler, and even his great success on the large city paper, didn't please him one-tenth as much.

Before the sun of another day had set Rydick died,—died, holding the hand of the forgiving sister, the stealing of whose inheritance had been his first great crime, and the one which, at the end, he seemed to repent the most.

When John Sacker was able to leave the hospital, officers took him to Westerfield. Unable to obtain bondsmen, he lay for months in jail, while his ill-gotten property was largely consumed in his efforts to escape the punishment he so thoroughly merited. The sentence of ten years in the penitentiary, at last meted out to him, was considered little enough.

Pitt Sagger, or Sacker, as his real name was, and Jay and Martin Waldo lived riotously at

their uncle's home while his property lasted. They were forced to other quarters at last. In the end all three were dependent upon the charity of John Sacker's aged housekeper, the one friend who stood by him to the last, for even his nephews refused to bid him good-bye when he was taken away by the sheriff.

Sam Carew's relations with the now defunct Star Lake club in time became generally known. He had long since quarreled with Fred Perth and Percy Hassett and now he was without a chum, as he truly deserved to be.

Kind-hearted "Uncle" Joe Brush was shocked and amazed beyond description to find the Mr. "Sagger," of whom he thought so well, to be so little deserving of his good opinion. For weeks following that awful night he was so depressed, his best friends would hardly have recognized him. Pete Whaley was his constant attendant, however, and when, one day, the colored boy told of the trouncing the three cousins received on the north shore of the lake, Uncle

Joe broke into a hearty laugh and from that moment was quite himself again.

It was not until the second day after the night of the storm and excitement that the Thirty again carried the four boys to Gleason's farm. What was their surprise to see Duck Neely there, at work, as usual.

"I can't make it out nohow," said Tyler Gleason. "Duck's back and like his own self ag'in, except that he's forever readin' over an' over all the newspapers say about that Rydick and Sacker, an' sayin' 'I knowed it!' Of course he didn't, but there ain't no harm in it, I s'pose."

It lightened the hearts of the boys greatly to find the hired man in his place again, contented and happy. Their last cause for worry and the last of their mysteries was now removed. Gayly they drove through the warmth and brightness of the summer evening as the sun went down.

One incident the Auto Boys had not foreseen occurred a fortnight later, reminding them once

again of the terrible affair with which they had so innocently been connected. A check for one thousand dollars was handed them by Mr. Dilworth.

"I just suggested to the county authorities that the reward offered some time ago belonged to you boys," said the good-hearted but gruff old fellow. "They agreed with me when they understood that I meant what I said. The check is sent with their compliments, which latter, however, you will probably not be able to get anything for at the bank."

Thus, full sixty days in advance of the date for the final payment on their car, the Auto Boys had money and to spare safely deposited to their credit. Pleased is too mild a word to describe properly their feelings. But, though they were glad and happy now, still further pleasure awaited them and grew wonderfully day by day.

They were arranging for a vacation. Truly they deserved one and as they invariably played as hard as they worked, needless to say they

hoped for much. Nor were they disappointed. The pleasures and happiness, the surprises and excitement the vacation time brought, however, make a story in themselves, which will be found in the second volume—"The Auto Boys' Outing."

THE BRADEN BOOKS

FAR PAST THE FRONTIER

By JAMES A. BRADEN

The sub-title "Two Boy Pioneers" indicates the nature of this story—that it has to do with the days when the Ohio Valley and the Northwest country were sparsely settled. Such a topic is an unfailing fund of interest to boys, especially when involving a couple of stalwart young men who leave the East to make their fortunes and to incur untold dangers.

"Strong, vigorous, healthy, manly."—*Seattle Times.*

CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

By JAMES A. BRADEN

The author once more sends his heroes toward the setting sun. "In all the glowing enthusiasm of youth, the youngsters seek their fortunes in the great, fertile wilderness of northern Ohio, and eventually achieve fair success, though their progress is hindered and sometimes halted by adventures innumerable. It is a lively, wholesome tale, never dull, and absorbing in interest for boys who love the fabled life of the frontier."—*Chicago Tribune.*

THE TRAIL of THE SENECA

By JAMES A. BRADEN

In which we follow the romantic careers of John Jerome and Return Kingdom a little farther.

These two self-reliant boys are living peaceably in their cabin on the Cuyahoga when an Indian warrior is found dead in the woods nearby. The Seneca accuses John of witchcraft. This means death at the stake if he is captured. They decide that the Seneca's charge is made to shield himself, and set out to prove it. Mad Anthony, then on the Ohio, comes to their aid, but all their efforts prove futile and the lone cabin is found in ashes on their return.

CAPTIVES THREE

By JAMES A. BRADEN

A tale of frontier life, and how three children—two boys and a girl—attempt to reach the settlements in a canoe, but are captured by the Indians. A common enough occurrence in the days of our great-grandfathers has been woven into a thrilling story.

BOUND IN CLOTH, each handsomely illustrated, cloth, postpaid - - $1.00

The Saalfield Publishing Co.

AKRON, OHIO

BOOKS FOR BOYS

WINFIELD SERIES:

LARRY BARLOW'S AMBITION
A YOUNG INVENTOR'S PLUCK

These two books of adventure for boys, by the popular author of the ROVER BOYS' SERIES, have attained an enviable reputation, and are read by thousands and thousands of boys everywhere.

CASTLEMON SERIES:

A STRUGGLE FOR A FORTUNE
WINGED ARROW'S MEDICINE
THE FIRST CAPTURE

HARRY CASTLEMON ranks among the best of the writers of juvenile fiction. His various books are in constant and large demand by the boys who have learned to look for his name as author as a guaranty of a good story.

BONEHILL SERIES:

THE BOY LAND BOOMER
THREE YOUNG RANCHMEN

Stories of western life that are full of adventure, which read as if they happened day before yesterday.

RATHBORNE SERIES:

DOWN THE AMAZON
ADRIFT ON A JUNK
YOUNG VOYAGERS OF THE NILE
YOUNG CASTAWAYS

For boys who have had their fill of adventures on land, the RATHBORNE books are ever welcome. They make one feel the salt breeze, and hear the shouts of the sailor boys.

OTIS SERIES:

TEDDY — MESSENGER No. 48
TELEGRAPH TOM — DOWN THE SLOPE

JAMES OTIS writes for wide-awake American boys, and his audience read his tales with keen appreciation.

Each of the above books bound in Cloth, Illustrated, 12mos, postpaid, - - $1.00

The Saalfield Publishing Co.,
AKRON, OHIO

FICTION FOR BOYS

LITTLE RHODY

By JEAN K. BAIRD

Illustrated by R. G. VOSBURGH

At The Hall, a boys' school, there is a set of boys known as the "Union of States," to which admittance is gained by excelling in some particular the boys deem worthy of their mettle.

Rush Petriken, a hunchback boy, comes to The Hall, and rooms with Barnes, the despair of the entire school because of his prowess in athletics. Petriken idolizes him, and when trouble comes to him, the poor crippled lad gladly shoulders the blame, and is expelled. But shortly before the end of the term he returns and is hailed as "little Rhody," the "capitalest State of all."

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated, - $1.50

BIGELOW BOYS

By MRS. A. F. RANSOM

Illustrated by HENRY MILLER

Four boys, all bubbling over with energy and love of good times, and their mother, an authoress, make this story of a street-car strike in one of our large cities move with leaps and bounds. For it is due to the four boys that a crowded theatre car is saved from being wrecked, and the instigators of the plot captured.

Mrs. Ransom is widely known by her patriotic work among the boys in the navy, and she now proves herself a friend of the lads on land by writing more especially for them.

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated, - $1.50

Books sent postpaid on receipt of price.

The Saalfield Publishing Co.

AKRON, OHIO

RALPH MARLOWE

A Tale of the Buckeye State

By

DR. JAMES BALL NAYLOR

Author of "THE SIGN OF THE PROPHET"

"There is an atmosphere about the story of RALPH MARLOWE—the picturesque atmosphere of quiet, rustic southeastern Ohio, and there is an equal measure of delicious humor and delicate pathos about it also.

Get this novel and read it—The time will be well spent."

—*North American, Philadelphia.*

"Dr. Naylor has constructed a very readable story. He has been remarkably successful in transferring to the canvas of fiction Ohio farmers and village folk, and the story is worthy to take its place beside the best of those written in recent years which take as their particular task the picturing of life in rural districts."

American Monthly Reviews of Rewiews.

Handsomely bound in bright red cloth, gold lettered, emblematic cover design in white and gold, 12 mo., $1.50

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY • • • Akron, Ohio

FICTION FOR GIRLS

BETTY, The SCRIBE

By LILIAN TURNER

Drawings by KATHARINE HAYWARD GREENLAND

Betty is a brilliant, talented, impulsive seventeen-year-old girl, who is suddenly required to fill her mother's place at the head of a household, with a literary, impractical father to manage.

Betty writes, too, and every time she mounts her Pegasus disaster follows for home duties are neglected. Learning of one of these lapses, her elder sister comes home. Betty storms and refuses to share the honors until she remembers that this means long hours free to devote to her beloved pen. She finally moves to the city to begin her career in earnest, and then — well, then comes the story.

"Miss Turner is Miss Alcott's true successor. The same healthy, spirited tone is visible which boys and girls recognized in LITTLE MEN and LITTLE WOMEN." — *The Bookman*

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated, - $1.50

Elizabeth Hobart at Exeter Hall

By JEAN K. BAIRD

Illustrated by R. G. VOSBURGH

A spirited story of every-day boarding-school life that girls like to read. Full of good times and girlish fun.

Elizabeth enters the school and loses no time in becoming one of the leading spirits. She entertains at a midnight spread, which is recklessly conducted under the very nose of the preceptress, who is "scalped" in order to be harmless, for every one knows she would never venture out minus her front hair; she champions an ostracized student; and leads in a daring plan to put to rout the Seniors' program for class day.

CLOTH, 12mo, illustrated, - $1.50

Books sent postpaid on receipt of price.

The Saalfield Publishing Co.,

AKRON, OHIO

FAMOUS BOOKS by FAMOUS AUTHORS

HANDSOME JUVENILES

A STRUGGLE FOR A FORTUNE . . . . . *By* HARRY CASTLEMON
WINGED ARROW'S MEDICINE . . . . . *By* HARRY CASTLEMON
THE FIRST CAPTURE . . . . . *By* HARRY CASTLEMON
LARRY BARLOW'S AMBITION . . . . . *By* ARTHUR M. WINFIELD
A YOUNG INVENTOR'S PLUCK . . . . . *By* ARTHUR M. WINFIELD
THE BOY FISHERMAN . . . . . *By* FRANK E. KELLOGG
FOUR BOYS ON THE MISSISSIPPI . . . . . *By* FRANK E. KELLOGG
CAPTIVES THREE . . . . . *By* JAMES A. BRADEN
FAR PAST THE FRONTIER . . . . . *By* JAMES A. BRADEN
CONNECTICUT BOYS IN THE WESTERN RESERVE *By* JAMES A. BRADEN
THE CABIN IN THE BIG WOODS . . . . . *By* JAMES BALL NAYLOR
A GALLANT GRENADIER . . . . . *By* CAPT. F. S. BRERETON
THE BOY LAND BOOMER . . . . . *By* CAPT. RALPH BONEHILL
THREE YOUNG RANCHMEN . . . . . *By* CAPT. RALPH BONEHILL
THE YELLOW VIOLIN . . . . . *By* MARY A. DENISON
THE ROMANCE OF A SCHOOL BOY . . . . . *By* MARY A. DENISON
TELEGRAPH TOM'S VENTURE . . . . . *By* JAMES OTIS
TEDDY . . . . . *By* JAMES OTIS
MESSENGER No. 48 . . . . . *By* JAMES OTIS
DOWN THE SLOPE . . . . . *By* JAMES OTIS
THROUGH AN UNKNOWN ISLE . . . . . *By* CHARLES P. CHIPMAN
TWO BOYS AND A DOG . . . . . *By* CHARLES P. CHIPMAN
THE LAST CRUISE OF THE ELECTRA . . . . . *By* CHARLES P. CHIPMAN
TIMOTHY AND HIS FRIENDS . . . . . *By* MARY E. IRELAND
BREAK O'DAY BOYS . . . . . *By* VICTOR ST. CLAIR
FORGE AND FURNACE . . . . . *By* VICTOR ST. CLAIR
PHIL AND DICK . . . . . *By* ENRIQUE H. LEWIS
HIS MOTHER'S LETTER . . . . . *By* J. M. MERRILL
VANCE SEVIER . . . . . *By* WILLIAM PERRY BROWN
SEA ISLAND BOYS . . . . . *By* WILLIAM PERRY BROWN
FLORIDA LADS . . . . . *By* WILLIAM PERRY BROWN
RALPH GRANGER'S FORTUNE . . . . . *By* WILLIAM PERRY BROWN
RESCUED BY A PRINCE . . . . . *By* CLEMENT ELDRIDGE
THE BOY CAPTAIN . . . . . *By* CLEMENT ELDRIDGE
THE PRIZE WATCH . . . . . *By* EMILY GUILLON FULLER
MAKING THE BOUNDARY . . . . . *By* EDWARD EVERETT BILLINGS
THE CASTLE OF THE CARPATHIANS . . . . . *By* JULES VERNE
TOUR OF THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS . . . . . *By* JULES VERNE
LITTLE BY LITTLE . . . . . *By* OLIVER OPTIC
TEN NIGHTS IN A BAR-ROOM . . . . . *By* T. S. ARTHUR
IN A CAR OF GOLD . . . . . *By* P. L. GRAY
ZANZIBAR TALES . . . . . *By* GEORGE W. BATEMAN

All the above are handsomely bound in cloth, profusely illustrated, gold lettered, special cover designs, zamos.

PRICE, $1.00 EACH

Sent postpaid upon receipt of price by

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY, AKRON, OHIO